February 2

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To the Editors

Remembering Frank

I was saddened by the news of Frank McConnell's death [issue of February 12, 1999]: May he rest in peace. It has motivated me to write my first letter to you since starting reading *Commonweal* fifteen-plus years ago.

I had wanted to write about (or to) Frank for a while, and what I had wanted to say may serve as a bit of a tribute to him. I always enjoyed reading his columns, although I must agree with a previous letter writer that Frank's columns sometimes didn't seem to be inspired by a very "Catholic" sensibility.

In a column from many years ago, Frank had said something to the effect that Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* was the best novel written in English. I took this as quite a recommendation, and struggled through the book diligently. Let's just say that I don't agree with Frank's praise (to put it mildly). This experience didn't diminish my enjoyment of his columns, however, so last year I read Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* which Frank had praised very highly (a blurb from his review was even on the book as a testimonial). I very much enjoyed *Mason and Dixon*, so Frank gets extra credit from me for that review. His media columns and reviews have left me with a few other "to-dos": try and read several things by Neil Gaiman (especially *Sandman* if I can ever find it), and read Harold Bloom's new book about Shakespeare. I'll miss Frank's presence in *Commonweal* quite a bit: His style and manner of expression were great.

While I'm writing, I'd just like to reiterate what my continuous renewals should have been telling you: I love reading *Commonweal*. It gets read from cover to cover by me every issue (which means I'm always behind: I just finished reading the "Fall Books" issue, although I do browse the Table of Contents as each issue falls on the stack, which is where I saw "Frank McConnell, R.I.P."), and my wife reads a great deal of it as well. Out of a general level of excellence, I particularly like John Garvey's columns—he has a wonderfully clear view of so many issues—and Richard Alleva's film reviews. I have often gone back to re-read a review after seeing a film Alleva has recommended, and I usually find that he has nicely grasped the key points and elements of the film.

DENIS KEANE
Evanston, Ill.

Evolving in truth

Congratulations to *Commonweal* on your continued search for truth, grounded in common sense, exemplified in your January 29, 1999 issue with Frans Jozef van Beeck's "The Women in My Life" and Rose Hoover's "Consider Tradition." In each article the force of the message is rooted, not in the differentiation of gender, but in the personhood of the Pauline quotation, "for you are all one person in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-28).

You have tempered this delightful treat of considerate dialogue with Yves Congar's cautionary words on patience; an excellent editorial choice. Our humanly frail church will, with such patience, evolve in truth.

JOHN E. LESCROART
North Palm Beach, Fla.

A rose is a rose

Rose Hoover's case for ordaining women is the most cogent and convincing use of faith and reason that I have yet seen about this weighty issue. Congratulations on such a *tour de force*.

ANDREW GALLIGAN
Tracy, Calif.

Better listeners

Let me get this straight. Women are barred from the priesthood—why? Because God wants men to become more feminine? As theology, that ranks right up there with children dying painful deaths to give strength to their parents.

Maybe Professor van Beeck ["The Women in My Life," January 29] should just stick to his real answer, "I don't know," when called upon to justify a rule based on tradition without using the tradition argument. Modern Catholic theologians need to decide whether they'd rather reject tradition outright (meaning they may start drawing conclusions the Vatican isn't crazy about) or give it its proper credit, at least for the sake of argument.

It's a peculiarity and a strength of the Catholic church that we do not rely on a literal interpretation of Scripture to explain all our rules and actions. That's how we're able to avoid the kind of tortuous explanations that van Beeck's essay displays. It's precisely because we cannot guess God's motives that we tend to cling to doing things the way we always have and to avoid making major changes without good and outstanding cause.

Tradition is a good thing. It's not perfect; as human beings, we are not always great listeners in our conversations with God.

DOROTHY COLE DOMRZALSKI
Albuquerque, N.Mex.

What an issue!

Now that was a great issue [January 29, 1999]! To begin with I admired your political insight in "The Rule of Law" [editorial]. Then Rose Hoover's piece was a masterful analysis of the various kinds of tradition, and how the church's true Tradition can be occlud-

(Continued on page 4)

Addendum from the editors

Several readers have written asking for more information about the journal *Books and Culture* mentioned in "The Evangelical Mind" by James Turner [January 15, 1999]. Here it is: www.booksandculture.net. Phone: 1-800-523-7964. It is published six times a year; a one-year subscription is $24.95.

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COMMONWEAL

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ed by trivial traditions; she gives a conclusive theology substantiating the right of women to be priested. And, speaking as an Anglican, I found Roy Darcus's "The Church Everyone Leaves" [Last Word column] wonderfully refreshing. To me that's a true take on Episcopalianism; the not-so-good as well as the really good.

Finally, I was particularly delighted by Frans Jozef van Beeck's piece ["The Women in My Life"], written with such good humor and really nailing in place more theology which cries out for the priesting of women. Of especial interest to me was his mentioning that all human beings begin life as females, since the egg from which any person develops always contains only the female X chromosome; if the sperm happens to provide a Y chromosome, maleness is established, but that's a second step along the way to life as a human being.

As further corroboration of the primacy of the female gender he might have mentioned the mitochondria in the cytoplasm of each human cell. Mitochondria are the small bodies whose chemical reactions are the initial source of cellular energy, and therefore of any person's bodily energy. Since the mitochondria present in the sperm are discarded when the egg is fertilized, it is only female energy which is passed on to every child, regardless of sex. That, to me, is highly significant in testifying to the importance of women not only in the world but perhaps particularly in the church, where basic energy equates with Spirit.

I hope the pope reads the whole issue.

SALLY CAMPBELL
Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.

Anglican to Anglican

I held on to the ropes for my dear Anglican life as Roy Darcus pulled no punches in "The Church Everyone Leaves" [January 29]. I howled as he drew blood out of our being a historical accident. I had my hopes lifted as he laid out the weakness of our case alongside the contingency story of the helpless Babe. That's probably why Anglicans have always felt closer to Christmas than to any other feast. It has everything to do with being human. Roy, write on and run for bishop.

(REV.) ROB MCCANN
Lafayette, Calif.

Vocational equals?

With regard to Rose Hoover's entry in the women's ordination debate ["Consider Tradition"], the subtitle you appended seems odd since no "case for ordaining women" is made. Sister Rose's essay simply rehashes the fact that the case against ordaining women is not strong. This may come as news to somebody out there, but if there are positive reasons for ordaining women that are stronger than those against the practice, these should have been brought out.

Second, I am an Episcopalian. Our church has been ordaining women for twenty-odd years. Perhaps I lack a sufficiently rarified sense, but I can detect no improvement whatsoever in the lot of Episcopalian women as a result of their eligibility for priestly ordination. They were a pretty well-off lot before and have continued doing fine since.

Third, the fact that I am not ordained does not, as far as I can tell, mean in the least that I am inferior, disadvantaged, or in any way a less-than-full participant in the life of the church. This is as true for any other nonordained person—or group of persons—as it is for me.

Finally, that men and women are moral equals in God's eyes does not necessarily mean that they are vocational equals. This has absolutely nothing to do with superiority or inferiority. At the end of the day, all the laborers are paid the same.

In the end, Sister Rose seems to be railing against the wind. The plain fact is that the Catholic church is not going to ordain women in the foreseeable future, period. As an Episcopalian who disagrees with my eccesiastical leaders on this matter, I am in essentially the same position and I can sympathize. My episcopal leadership is not going to stop ordaining women no matter how compelling I think my case against the practice. Maybe it's time to stop making it. Maybe it's time to accept the authority of those God has put in charge and move on.

DANIEL W. MUTH
Prince Frederick, Md.

Listening to the call

As a Catholic laywoman with an M. Div. and a Ph.D. in theology, I wanted to offer a response to Father van Beeck's article. First, I appreciated his candor and vulnerability about his own life and its connection to his intuitions about celibate male priesthood and the exclusion of women from ordination. More of us should make a straightforward connection between our personal history and our thoughts and intuitions when we write or converse about this issue, or any other issue that brings up strong opinions or intense feeling.

In turn then, I would like to offer a bit of personal history myself. I went through divinity school always using the line that I did not want to be ordained...that I shunned the need for that kind of official recognition or authority for my ministry. I think that I really believed that, or maybe I wanted to believe it. I felt even a little smug about my position. I wasn't looking for "power." I continued to feel this way until the spring of 1984. I was a patient representative at a medical center. It was Good Friday. I had been working with the daughter of a patient who had some complaints about her mother's care. The mother died on Good Friday and I was called to be with the daughter as she sat with her mother's body. I went to the room and prayed with her for about a half an hour. I remember looking out the window and having a definite, simple recognition: I was

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How say you?

Despite the tawdry nature of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and the vicious partisan politics behind the effort to impeach and remove Bill Clinton, it was impossible not to be impressed by the dignity and calm deliberation of the vote that ended the month-long Senate trial. For all its pettiness and excess, the event Americans have witnessed was remarkable. An effort has been made to depose the popularly elected leader of the world's most powerful nation, yet not one shot was fired; not one drop of blood shed.

In failure, the House Republicans retreated with relative, if not complete, equanimity. In victory, the president's friends and political allies issued no idle boasts or threats of vengeance. (Vowing to work for the defeat of Republican congressmen is not vengeance, but routine politics.) Both sides solemnly affirmed their loyalty to the Constitution and their resolve to abide, whatever their qualms about the process, by the Senate verdict. More remarkable, Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), the often bombastic leader of the House impeachment managers, urged Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr to end his continuing investigation of the president. "I don't think indicting and criminally trying him, after what we have all been through, is going to be helpful to the country," Hyde said. He's right—this time.

In the aftermath of his costly (politically and financially) and hard-fought-for acquittal, President Clinton also struck precisely the right note. In a appropriately brief statement, Clinton acknowledged that it was his own indefensible actions and false statements—not the depredations of his political enemies—that brought on impeachment and the yearlong national trauma. Of course, Republicans and Democrats will not fall into each others' arms any time soon. The distance between the core constituencies of the two parties remains daunting. Much has also been written about how the impeachment drama has deepened the public's alienation from and cynicism about politics. Certainly the public has reason for skepticism and frustration. But when Americans look at the violence and anarchy that accompany so much political conflict around the world, they also have reason to be grateful: grateful for the tensile strength of American democratic institutions, and grateful for the abiding comity in which our politics is enacted. If asked, "How say you?" about the health of this nation, Americans can answer: "Better than expected. Better, perhaps, than we deserve."

On the substance of the indictment against Clinton, Charles Ruff, the president's lead defense counsel, made the most persuasive case. Ruff reminded the Senate that impeachment was designed as a political weapon of last resort. Only when no other option is available should a democracy turn to impeachment. Removal from office, the president's lawyer argued, is warranted only when the president presents a threat to the constitutional order. Even if Clinton's deceptions and conniving as depicted by his accusers were true—and the factual case was far from airtight legally—the alleged wrongdoing did not rise to the high, indeed exceptional, standard the Constitution demands. Overturning the results of a democratic election should be done with fear and trembling, not as a petty, moralizing crusade. In failing to give the House managers even a simple majority in favor of either article of impeachment, the Senate unambiguously rejected the idea that Clinton's private

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excesses and failings justified a political execution.

Other conclusions can also be drawn from these events. Certainly the independent counsel statute, of dubious constitutionality to begin with, should be allowed to expire or be drastically reformed. Kenneth Starr thoroughly politicized his office, most offensively in becoming an advocate for impeachment, but also in repeated leaks to the press and in withholding the public exoneration of the Clintons in Whitewater and related matters until after the 1998 elections. The possibility that Starr misled Attorney General Janet Reno in seeking authority to investigate Monica Lewinsky is now being looked into by the Justice Department. But indicting Starr, perhaps a fitting, if ludicrous, end to what has become the criminalizing of political differences, is nothing anyone should wish for. As both the president and Congressman Hyde have said, now is the time for reconciliation, not retribution. The sooner Starr vacates his office, the better.

In presiding over the Senate trial, Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist earned much praise for his measured performance. However, it should also be noted that it was the Rehnquist Court's fatally flawed decision to allow Paula Jones's civil suit to go forward that precipitated much of what has followed. The Court largely based that decision on the dubious idea that a president who had to defend himself in a civil suit would not be distracted from his other duties. The Court's reasoning was implausible on its face, and as subsequent events have shown, utterly detached from political reality. Let the Court reverse itself, and let a president answer civil suits after his or her term of office expires. As the Jones case manifestly demonstrates, even so-called civil rights suits against a sitting president are simply too vulnerable to political manipulation.

It is hard to foresee what long-term effects Clinton's impeachment will have on the nation and our political culture. Democrats are hopeful that the public's disgust with impeachment will translate into votes against Republicans, and perhaps a return to Democratic control of the House. If the aftertaste of impeachment mobilizes the Democratic base and demoralizes the Republicans, that is possible. But much will depend on what happens between now and November of 2000.

In the meantime, Republicans will be licking their wounds and looking to exploit the president's next misstep. Given Bill Clinton's narcissism and hubris, they may not have long to wait.

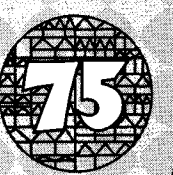
ET CETERA

WE SPOKE TOO SOON ■ In her review of John Bayley's *Elegy for Iris* [February 12], Margaret O'Brien Steinfels noted that Iris Murdoch had succumbed to Alzheimer's disease and her writing career was in the past tense, but that "an obituary is not yet in order."

Sorry then to report that according to the *New York Times* she died on Monday, February 8 in Oxford, England (the obituary appeared Tuesday, February 9 on page one of the *Times* and contained a series of excellent thumbnail reviews of many of her novels).

Bayley's moving account of his forty-year marriage to Murdoch is a fitting elegy indeed. Rosemary Dinnage's assessment, in a review of the same book (*New York Review of Books*, March 4, 1999), neatly summed up Murdoch's achievement: "Murdoch did not just write philosophy as a philosopher and fiction as a novelist. It is all part of one *oeuvre*, which annoys purists, and makes her something of a prophetess—a very quiet, a very unassuming one." One is tempted to think Murdoch was an indispensible prophetess as well.

From the archives



Throughout 1999, Commonweal *will be celebrating its 75th anniversary. Here from the June 9, 1950 issue is a letter to the editor from an unlikely source.*

To the Editors: I have read with extreme interest the editorial entitled "The Fifty Thousand," which appears in the May 19 issue of *The Commonweal.*

You have shown clearly, I think, the ultimate tragedy of communism which rests in its betrayal of God, self, and country. It is truly the final Christian heresy, as M. Jacques Maritain, with his characteristic imaginative insight, has explained. I do find dreadful to contemplate those instants in time when the Communists of this country made their decision to stand contrary to both the Christian and democratic traditions of the Western world.

Please accept my warmest congratulations for your thoughtful and decisive treatment of this compelling problem.

J. EDGAR HOOVER
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D.C.

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OF SEVERAL MINDS

E.J. DIONNE, Jr.

DEMOCRATS STRIKE GOLD

California's new politics

If California is still the place where the future happens first, Republicans may want to bring back the past. In Ronald Reagan's political homeland, the Republican party is in a fix.

It's said of the Chicago Cubs that every team has a bad century. For California Republicans, it may be about to happen. Former Governor Pete Wilson is now blamed for an anti-Republican backlash among the state's Latino voters. Proposition 187, it should be remembered, had Wilson's strong support in 1994 and cut off various state services to illegal immigrants. It galvanized a surge of Latino voter registration and gave Latinos a hard shove into Democratic arms.

In the meantime, white voters have abandoned the party of Reagan in droves. Some were pushed away by the Republicans' strong anti-abortion stand and the influence of Christian conservatives on the party. Others were drawn to the Democrats on environmental issues. Democratic Governor Gray Davis, a landslide winner last year over Republican Dan Lungren, made education the cornerstone of his campaign. And gun control has turned into a big Democratic winner among both urban and suburban voters. They see tougher gun laws as one more weapon in the anti-crime arsenal.

Bruce Cain, associate director of the University of California's Institute of Governmental Studies, recently hosted a conclave in Berkeley of key players in the 1998 elections. He describes the G.O.P.'s problem this way: "You're losing the whites with your social agenda and you're losing the Latinos with your racial and ethnic agenda. You can't do both of these things and win." Conversations with Republican and Democratic operatives alike suggest this is a consensus view.

A moralistic tone is hurting Republicans, says Leslie Goodman, deputy chief of staff to Wilson. In 1998, "you had the sense that the Republican party was the judgmental party or the judging party, and the Democrats were the helping party." The lesson, says this shrewd Republican veteran, is: "The era of preacher politics is over. People don't want ideologues wagging fingers in their faces."

Richard Dresner, who polled for Lungren and the California Republican party, is one Republican consultant who'll say publicly what others in his tribe say privately: The impeachment of President Bill Clinton has been a disaster for his party. "When 60 to 70 percent of the people don't want government to do something, they look at the people doing it and say a pox on your house," he says. Dresner thinks some Republicans stayed home this fall out of "disgust with the impeachment process and the association of Republicans with it."

Dresner argues that 1998 shattered four presumptions that once anchored Republican dominance in California. It was assumed that Republicans were more likely to vote than Democrats. That wasn't true in '98. Democrats are usually more willing than Republicans to bolt their party. Last year, the cross-party hemorrhaging sent Republican votes to Davis. In the past, Republicans counted on a reasonable share of the Latino vote—perhaps a third to 40 percent. They won less than 20 percent against Davis. Finally, no one expected the explosive growth in Latino voting that happened after the Prop 187 campaign. Democratic pollster Paul Maslin explains the new California math: In the 1980s, Latinos made up about 7 percent of the state's electorate and voted Democratic by about three to two. And that netted the Democrats a two-point lift in the typical election.

"Ninety-five percent want you to run again, so that they can vote against you."

Now, Latinos make up 14 to 15 percent of the electorate and are voting four-to-one Democratic, giving Democrats an eight to nine point boost. "That means that among the Anglo electorate, Republicans have to win by fifteen points to win an election," Maslin says.

To David Doak, a media consultant who, like Maslin, works for Davis, Republicans are "as lost culturally in terms of where the country is as the radical left was in the '60s and '70s." The "sea change since the height of Republican expansion in the Reagan years," Doak says, is that Democrats are now identified with "moderation," while Republicans "are becoming the narrower, more isolated party."

One bad spell doesn't make a trend, and both Dresner and Goodman see openings for a Republican comeback. California's open primary—it allows all voters to cast ballots in the primary of their choice—could "give us our most electable candidates," Goodman says. And Davis will have to deliver on his promise to improve the public schools, Maslin warns. "If he fails, Lord knows what happens—it could be vouchers, the collapse of the public school system, who knows what." Still, the prospect that the largest state in the union could become a Democratic bastion just might concentrate the Republican mind. □

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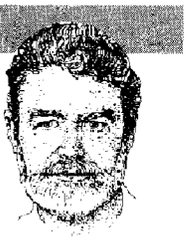
JOHN GARVEY



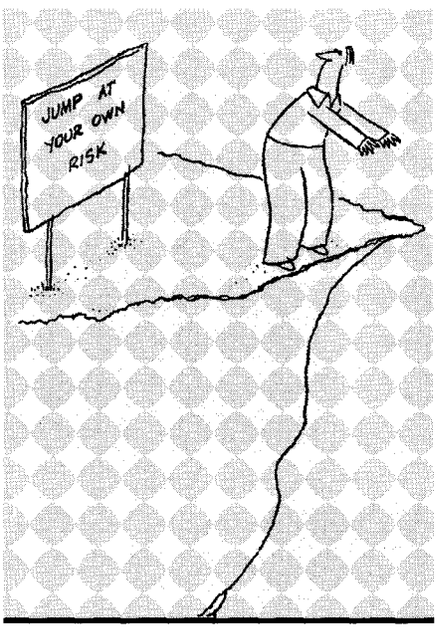
BEYOND PROOF

Seeking faith? Follow the hints

George Steiner, one of our greatest modern critics and one of the few who takes theology seriously, compares the writings surrounding Socrates and Jesus in his chapter, "Two Cocks" (*No Passion Spent*, Yale University Press, 1996). At the end of this powerful and challenging essay, in which he firmly rejects any fundamentalist or literalist approach to Scripture, Steiner writes: "Reason as I can, there are passages in the Old and New Testaments which I am unable to accord with any sensible image, however exalted, of normal authorship, of conception and composition as we seek to grasp them in even the greatest of thinkers and poets. Mundane imaginings are almost wholly rebuked by, for example, the thought of Shakespeare coming home for lunch and reporting on whether or not the writing of acts 3 and 4 of *King Lear* 'had gone well.' *Almost*. Considered reflection does allow such a vignette its place at the far edges of the ordinary. As I have remarked earlier, I am at a loss when, by analogy or similitude, I try to graft this picture onto the author of the speeches out of the whirlwind in Job. When I would apply it to certain sequences in the Psalms or Ecclesiastes. When I would explain to myself the genesis of such pericopes in the Gospels as Jesus' 'Before Abraham was, I am' or of very nearly the entirety of chapters 13–17 in John. In such biblical instances, the concept of a wholly rational hermeneutic escapes me. I find myself backed up against the harsh radiance of 'the scandalous.' It is not 'theology as grammar' which seems pertinent. It is grammar as theology."

This final paragraph of Steiner's essay points to a sense beyond either fundamentalism or its denial, to a claim that is put upon us at a level so close to the bone that it approaches the demand Jesus made of his followers: "Who do you say that I am?" And Steiner's choices are good ones. Anyone who can read God's answer to Job without the short hairs rising on the back of the neck is brain dead.

This passage brought me back to a recurrent thought: Belief is always based on a response to something less than clear and compelling evidence, and the old notion that one could be led logically, by argument, to faith is not only wrong but possibly a form of blasphemy. If faith could be proven you would have the proof, and lose God. What you get, and all you get, is a hint, a clue. It orients you. You have a choice: Go with this, or lose track. It is the direction, not some form of claim or ownership, that is the sign of faith. In Pascal's *Mystery of Jesus* (part of *Pensées*) the Lord says, "If you are seeking me, you have found me." It can be as faint as the way you look at some stars in deep darkness, by not seeing them directly, but looking at the dark next to them. You have the hope that it is God's leading, and not illusion or self-deception, that gets you to this place. Trust in God is nothing like a claim on him, or ownership, or a conviction of certainty that this is so.



And yet, there is something compelling here: The faint star really is there, and there is an authority about some passages in Scripture, some people you have met, some stories you have heard, that doesn't exist anywhere else. This is something you sense viscerally, and you hope it is true, and try to stake your life on not being deceived in this. It isn't proof. But there are moments when something cuts through our reading to our hearts. The story of Zacchaeus, his enthusiasm, and the sweet detail of a short man climbing a sycamore tree to see Jesus; Jesus' change of mind (he was passing through town, but is compelled to stay with Zacchaeus); the four short verses in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector that manage to cut to the heart; the parable of the prodigal son and his merciful father—if this sort of storytelling is not in some profound way divine inspiration, something in us needs it to be; if this is not true, why worry about truth at all? The power and beauty of these passages make us understand what Dostoevski meant when he said that if he had to choose between truth and Christ, he would choose Christ. (Simone Weil, citing this, pointed out that Christ, the way, the truth, and the life, would rather Dostoevski chose the truth.)

Dostoevski was a romantic who could also say, "Beauty will save the world." At nineteen you breathe, "Yes!" But then you think of the Nazis who wept listening to Bach and Mozart after days full of murder. Sorry—beauty isn't good enough. Dostoevski also wrote, in commenting on his composition of the chapters "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that his "hosannah of belief" was "forged in the crucible of great doubt." That may be closer to the experience of many of us.

The passages that Steiner cites do something beautiful and powerful; so does much good art. The parables of Jesus are succinct, charged examples of perfect storytelling. But more: They

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bring you to a stop. Without offering anything like a proof, they speak with such authority that—beyond proof or disproof, certainty or doubt—they make me think that if this isn't the truth about God and God's relationship to us, nothing is; and that can be enough to bring someone to the edge of faith, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11: 1). I know how passages from John's Gospel worked on one person I know.

During the time when communism in Albania had crushed religion, or tried to, a young man of Muslim background was given a copy of a book in French by someone who knew his love of French literature. The person who gave him the book was not aware that it was a French translation of the Gospel according to Saint John. The young man read it, decided that he had to become a Christian, and, as other people guarded the place and watched for the secret police, he was baptized in the basement of a house of an Orthodox priest who, at great risk to his life, had continued to serve the church. The young man left Albania, became a monk, returned to Albania to serve the church, and is now Metropolitan John, the bishop of Korce.

The fact that he is now a bishop where once he might have been murdered for his faith is wonderful (the man who baptized him is now also a bishop in the synod of the Orthodox church in Albania), but what moves me most is the thought of his encounter with the word of God in John, and the knowledge that he must become a Christian. That moment is full of the radiance not only of "the scandalous," but a reminder that the power at work among us is the power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. □

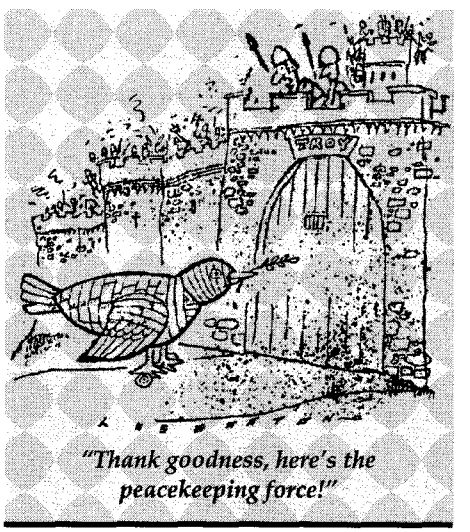
John Horgan

IRELAND & NATO

Dublin to enlist?

Plainly emboldened by the ongoing, if intermittent progress of the peace process in Northern Ireland, a number of senior Irish political figures have recently inaugurated a public debate on two issues which have traditionally aroused deep suspicions in the Irish body politic: membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and membership in the Commonwealth.

The issue of Commonwealth membership has been raised several times—most recently on January 14—by the *taoiseach* (prime minister) of the Irish Republic, Bertie Ahern, who said that the Irish decision to leave, taken in 1949 (just after India had joined as a republic), was too hasty and destroyed a bridge Eamon de Valera, Ireland's first prime minister, had hoped would help to unite North and South. De Valera tried to reopen the question of Commonwealth membership in secret discussions with London in 1957, but only on the basis that the British would take an initiative by issuing an invitation to Ireland to rejoin. The British declined to take the bait. Ahern, in launching the debate now, has taken an initiative that De Valera felt politically unable to take forty years ago.



"Thank goodness, here's the peacekeeping force!"

Irish Foreign Minister David Andrews has, for his part, formally re-opened a discussion on possible Irish membership of the U.S.-sponsored Partnership for Peace, which had been initiated cautiously by his predecessor, Dick Spring, and on which a decision will be taken by the cabinet before the end of 1999. Although not formally linked to NATO, the Partnership includes NATO states and is generally considered as a kind of anteroom which can be safely entered by states that have political or ideological difficulties in adhering to the larger organization.

The links between the Northern Ireland issue and the often-vexed question of Ireland's military neutrality have a long history. They surfaced in an acute form during secret negotiations between the Irish and British governments at the onset of World War II, when Churchill failed to persuade De Valera that an undertaking by him to try to sway Unionists into a united Ireland after the war was sufficient exchange for an abandonment of Irish neutrality.

During the war, Fianna Fail, De Valera's party, made the neutrality policy peculiarly its own, but also popularized it to the extent that it achieved an independent existence outside the ranks of the party faithful, and indeed became virtually a touchstone of Irishness in the minds of some. It had the advantage of being a distinguishing mark or characteristic of the Irish polity, one that made it particularly attractive to many of those whose attempts to achieve the two primary nationalist objectives—Irish unity and the revival of the Irish language—had met with a conspicuous lack of success.

The interparty government of 1948–51 formally declined an invitation to join NATO, ostensibly on the grounds that this would have involved a recognition of the partitioning of Ireland. It is now more generally agreed that the major reason was pique on the part of the then-foreign minister, Sean MacBride, at the rejection by the United States of overtures he had made for the creation of a new bilateral relationship between the two countries.

In the minds of the many Irish voters, over the years neu-

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trality has become elevated to the status of a principle. The question of Irish membership in the Partnership is therefore potentially of great significance. It is plain that there is a perceived link between Irish membership in such a body, and anxiety, on the part of the Irish defense forces, that they might be left out of the procurement loop. Irish membership of UN peace-keeping forces in the Congo in 1960 provided the Irish armed forces with levels of equipment and international associations to which they had previously aspired in vain. Membership in the Partnership, it is thought, would involve a similar boost in terms both of equipment and morale.

Ahern, in his January speech, joined the chorus when he said that there was no reason why Ireland should continue to adopt an isolationist stance on purely ideological grounds. Foreign Minister Andrews has subtly moved the goal posts, redefining military neutrality as excluding any military alliance "based on nuclear weapons," and has invoked the experience of other neutral countries, not least Switzerland, which have not found their traditional defense policies and Partnership membership to be in conflict.

The defenders of Irish neutrality and opponents of rejoining the Commonwealth (and they include, principally, Sinn Fein, the leftist parties, and the small Green party) may find that, faced with such opposition, they will be able to do little more than mount a token protest when the time comes. But Fianna Fail, in particular, is deeply aware of the ways in which the ambiguities of its policy positions on these issues over the previous decades have become deeply embedded in the Irish political psyche, and will not be anxious to move too quickly, without preparing the ground. This is precisely what now seems to be happening. □

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Winnifred Fallers Sullivan

EXPORTING RELIGION

Where the Religious Freedom Act fails

Fueled by news reports of religious persecution, there is much talk these days, often urgently expressed, about the need for Americans to take responsibility for the promotion and enforcement of rights to religious freedom around the world. The project has broad and enthusiastic support from legislators, within churches, and among the general population. In addition to private initiatives promoting religious freedom abroad, and in response to intense lobbying, the U.S. Senate has recently unanimously passed and the president has signed into law, the International Religious Freedom Act. The new act is quite elaborate. It creates a special State Department office to monitor religious persecution and requires preparation by that office of annual reports describing religious freedom violations in every country in the world, as well as special training of foreign service officers and immigration officials and the opening of American embassies to religious activities. A special adviser on international religious freedom is to be added to the National Security Council. To oversee these new civil servants, the act provides for the creation of an independent watchdog advisory commission on religious freedom. Finally, the president is directed to take action, on the basis of the annual reports, to promote religious freedom around the world.

It should not need saying that everyone should deplore murder, torture, and unjust imprisonment of identified minorities, for whatever reason, and that everyone should be tireless in finding ways to promote a more tolerant global community. But maybe that has to be said before challenging something as basic to American identity as the promotion of religious freedom.

What, if anything, should Americans do about stories of religious persecution, or, more broadly, of limitations on religious freedom, outside the United States? Should religious freedom, *as a legally protected right*, be enforced as a universal goal, and, if so, does this act, and the movement that supports it, actually do that? The act, and its predecessor versions, some of which targeted only the persecution of Christians, have been criticized by experts in the international human rights community (and by *Commonweal* in its August 15, 1997, editorial) for failing to acknowledge: (1) that what is called religious persecution is often actually motivated by a complex mix of racial, ethnic, and political animus; (2) that prioritizing religious persecution over other human-rights abuses may unfairly allocate resources in such a way as to discriminate against those persecuted for other reasons; and (3) that such attention may in some cases do more harm than good to the very people it is intended to help. While finding each of these criticisms important, I will focus here on a prior issue. Even if these criticisms could be addressed by better drafting, have we properly thought through the underlying rationale for this policy? Should Americans be undertaking the policing of international religious freedom at all?

To begin with, what does the International Religious Freedom Act mean by "religion"? Legal language demands clearly defined boundaries, boundaries that are hard to come by when talking about religion. It is difficult to set such boundaries without privileging a certain kind of religion. Section 2 of the new act (which can be found on the web at frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/congress), titled "Findings," asserts that:

> The right to freedom of religion undergirds the very origin and existence of the United States. Many of our nation's founders fled religious persecution abroad, cherishing in their hearts and minds the ideal of religious freedom. They established in law, as a fundamental right and as a pillar of our nation, the right to freedom of religion. From its birth to this day, the United States has prized this legacy of religious freedom

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and honored this heritage by standing for religious freedom and offering refuge to those suffering from religious persecution.

Well, sort of. This is not history. This is myth. While religious freedom has undeniably been a proud hallmark of American political life, religious freedom has had a rockier career in the United States, particularly in the beginning, than is usually acknowledged. Who are "they"? If by "our nation's founders" is meant those who fought the revolution and wrote the Constitution, none of them fled persecution. If "they" means the colonial founders, a few "cherished" religious liberty, William Penn, Roger Williams, and arguably Lord Baltimore. Most did not. The last sentence of section 2 is simply untrue. The United States has continuously denied religious freedom to some of its own citizens, African-Americans, Mormons, Catholics, and Native Americans, among others, and it has refused to admit refugees persecuted for their religion, including Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany.

Are these simply an academic's quibbles? What do these myths do apart from making us feel smug about being Americans? The story told by the "Findings" section of the act, a story which could be recited by any American schoolchild, by its broad and inclusive language, conceals the theological assumptions underlying the American promotion of religious freedom and conceals the complex reality of religious life. Its comprehensive claims discourage questions. If one reads through this new act with a more nuanced understanding of American religious history, one is continually struck by the way in which it promotes a peculiarly American understanding of what religion is. Religion is understood by this act, and indeed by most Americans, to be individual, chosen, private, believed, and separate from other institutions and identities. For most of the world, religion is communal, given, public, enacted, and intertwined with other institutions and identities. This new act is clearly not intended to promote freedom of *religion*. It is intended to promote freedom of a certain kind of religion, religion as it has been shaped by American law and history, religion that has been set apart and contained by the secular state. Much religious activity is simply not intended to be protected: religiously motivated refusal of medical care for children, the exclusive use of sacred public lands by indigenous peoples, religiously motivated restrictions on education, family coercion in religious matters, and, of course, religiously motivated violence, among others. Yet all of these are historically a major part of religious practice.

Is it inevitable that freedom be, in fact, freedom of the right kind of religion? Is there any way to avoid the paradoxical result that what sounds absolute is in fact quite circumscribed? Is there a principled way to separate religion that should be protected from religion that should not? Or to separate religious from nonreligious activity? Careful attention to what we mean by religion is indispensable. Religion is at the heart of the modern identity crisis. In many ways it has been the "other" against which modern secular

"Is this a trick question?"

democratic society has constructed itself. The promotion of religious liberty puts into relief the existential situation of the modern global citizen: how to reconcile a commitment to individual liberty with an acknowledgment that individuals are formed in the context of shared histories, histories not entirely of their making or of their choice. Religious histories, institutions, ideas, and people shape those histories, for better or worse, and religious histories, institutions, ideas, and people are deeply compromised, by Original Sin, if you will.

One could argue that religious freedom is being promoted, in part, at this point in human history because of the realization that the secular state may have been too quick to dismiss religion as incompatible with modern rational society. Maybe people cannot live and be whole without religion. But the difficulty is that, while we find ourselves, at this new historical moment, in a new global situation, one that is acknowledging the importance of religion, we have not revised our peculiarly modern and American understanding of religion. In promoting religious freedom we are still relying on a stripped-down understanding of religion that finds its origin in Protestant and Enlightenment theories of the state and of religion—one that sees religion's role as one of teaching virtue to its citizens through the training of private consciences—and which often simply refuses to acknowledge cultural aspects of religious life. If the Enlightenment model of religion is abandoned because it has been found to be discriminatory against other kinds of religion, if *all* religion is readmitted to the public space—it turns out that religion is a pretty unwieldy partner in the promotion of democracy and freedom.

Certainly governments need to be more informed about and more sensitive to religious issues. But because of the complexity and deep ambiguity of religious reality, might it not be better for the U.S. government to condemn torture, unjust imprisonment, murder, and abridgment of freedom, however motivated, while religious communities participated in rethinking modernity's critical assessment of religion? Perhaps it would be better to promote religious understanding and tolerance through education and dialogue than through overambitious legislation. □

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WHO GOT IMPEACHED?

Assessing the political damage

Wilson Carey McWilliams

Washington's longest-running show has finally come to a close, and almost no one will miss it. There never was any drama in the Impeachment Follies—the votes to remove the president simply weren't there, especially given his strength in the polls—and it was pretty boring even as a soap opera, since the characters, Monica and Bill, Ken and Linda, were more tawdry than engaging. Toward the end, the House managers were reduced to reruns, seemingly puzzled by their failure the first time around; even the jokes have stopped being funny. As political theater, it was a disaster for Republicans, and Americans—already resentful about Judge Starr's $40 million flop—are wondering about the price they paid for admission.

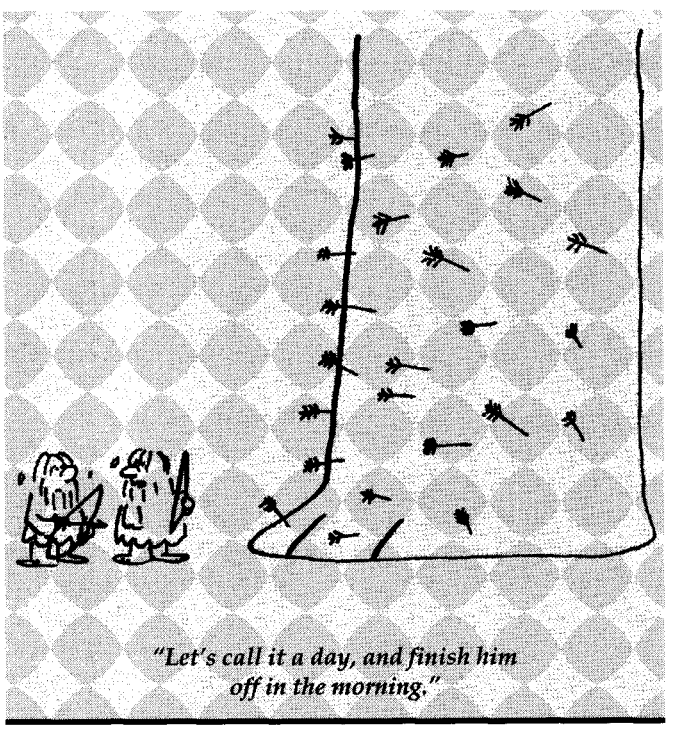
Certainly, it has damaged our institutions. Bill Clinton has helped to take the remaining shine off the presidency, but the majority of Americans appear to recognize that his "impropriety" was less hurtful to the office than the insistence on exposing it in all its less-than-titillating details. As a result, Congress, which had even less of a moral aura to start with, is falling even lower in public esteem: the Republicans, as the congressional majority, seemed to have turned self-destructive, rejecting the pragmatism that is the hallmark of American politics.

Republicans, however, have their reasons, even if, in the last analysis, their calculations prove to be in error. The great majority of members of Congress can afford to ignore national opinion polls: They are elected by districts in which their party is dominant and—in the case of Republicans—where most voters probably want the president disemboweled. At a generous estimate, only about fifty seats in the House and fifteen in the Senate can really be said to be at risk. Still, that minority could, at any number of points, have brought the charade to a close; the mystery, consequently, is the Republicans' lemming-like solidarity.

Even the safest Republican members of Congress find it wise to worry about primaries, and hence about the party's right wing: conservatives are disproportionately strong among primary electorates, since the less zealous are apt to forget or stay home. Aside from the risk of losing a primary—realistically, a small one for most incumbents—any challenge drains campaign funds and leaves some scars. In competitive districts or states, moreover, primary contests pull candidates to the right, away from the center that is likely to be the decisive ground in a general election, so that moderates walk on eggs wherever the right might take mortal offense.

Also, in the internal life of the House and Senate, careers—and especially, projects that benefit a member's state or district—turn very heavily on the favor of party leaders. Paradoxically, Newt Gingrich, whose high ambitions make him sensitive to broad currents of opinion, might have been disposed to make a deal short of impeachment. As it was, the dominant presences in the House were right-wingers like Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) and Dick Armey (R-Tex.), so militant they make even Trent Lott (R-Miss.) look moderate, neo-Confederate nostalgia and all. DeLay and his friends are not people who hesitate to punish deviants, as Peter King (R-N.Y.) has found since voting against impeachment, and any Republican with a legislative agenda had ample grounds for observing party orthodoxy.

It is important, too, that wavering Republicans knew that the president wasn't going to be removed from office, once the final vote was taken. At every point in the process—in



"Let's call it a day, and finish him off in the morning."

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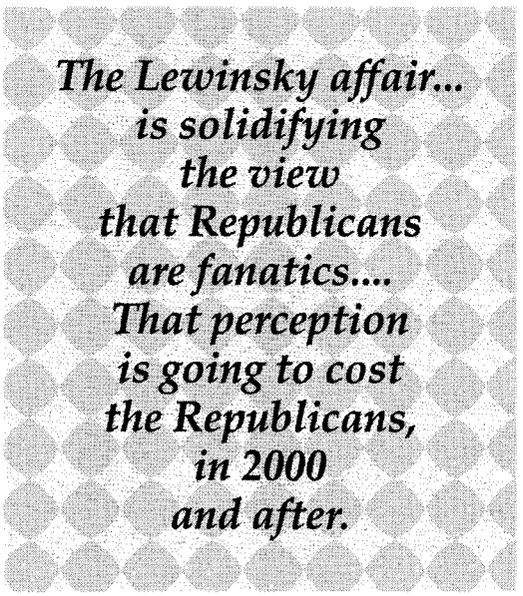
the House, but also in the early stages of the Senate trial—it was tempting to pass the buck, relying on the fact that in the end, the imbroglio would come to nothing and *someday* would drop out of sight and out of mind: Conservatives will *remember* how you voted, but moderates—who probably don't care that much or are distracted by other issues—are more likely to forget.

Former Senator Alan Simpson, a shrewd head, recommended that strategy, encouraging Republicans to discount the polls, trusting to the electorate's fabulously short memory and capacity for inattention. It's a gamble: back in 1990, New Jersey Democrats were assuring one another that anger over Governor Jim Florio's tax increase would dissipate before the next election; in fact, Democrats lost both houses of the legislature and eventually the governorship, and are still trying to claw their way back. Some Republicans, in fact, ought to know that any such hope is forlorn. Tom Campbell (R-Calif.), for example, comes from a highly educated, liberal-to-moderate district—its political epicenter is Palo Alto and Stanford University—and his vote for impeachment makes him a good bet to lose in next year's election.


The Lewinsky affair... is solidifying the view that Republicans are fanatics.... That perception is going to cost the Republicans, in 2000 and after.

Nevertheless, Simpson is right, up to a point. Most voters will forget political specifics, and in no very long term. Further, while despising Congress as a whole, they give their own representatives a broad measure of tolerance. But political events, half-remembered, do form voters' images of a *party*. A few years after 1972, relatively few Americans could have said much about George McGovern's actual proposals and platform, but they were left with an enduring impression of Democrats as dovish and permissive liberals, identified with the counterculture, a notion that still influences American politics. The Lewinsky affair, similarly, is solidifying the view that Republicans are fanatics, in the grip of the religious right or partisan ideologues willing to shut down the government or wreck the country. That perception is going to cost the Republicans, in 2000 and after.

The interesting story in the Republicans' obsession isn't the moderates' willingness to kowtow, but the peculiar intensity of the right's hatred for Clinton (a man transparently too weak to be grandly evil), a loathing evident since the earliest days of Clinton's presidency.

In the first place, for social conservatives Clinton symbolizes the culture of the '60s, and with it, the forces of moral decay—a draft-dodging McGovern supporter, sexually promiscuous, tolerant of homosexuality, and, above all, a challenge to traditional gender roles. Mr. Clinton is soft, pliant, and conciliatory. Mrs. Clinton (until recently, much less popular than the president) is a person with convictions and commitments who does not shrink from the battle; worst of all, before his presidency, Mrs. Clinton made more money than her husband. (For the evangelical right, of course, it accentuates the president's faults that he is, at least nominally, a born-again Christian, so that the anti-Clinton crusade takes on the color of a trial for heresy.) Conservatives are only beginning to recognize how pervasive—and how profound—social liberalism is in the country's mood. As Alan Wolfe observes, most people who hold traditional moral beliefs are not disposed to "judge" others. As Bill Bennett and his allies are beginning to learn, things in River City are even worse than they thought.

In one sense, the conservative pursuit of Clinton has been successful: it has turned the president away from any inclination to revive liberalism's economic agenda or fondness for the state, a possibility he flirted with early on, most evidently in relation to health care. Internationally, the '80s were dominated by the right, with Mrs. Thatcher its commanding spirit; the '90s have tilted, hesitantly but clearly, toward the left, invoking government to protect families and social order against the unsettlings of the market and technology. Clinton's sympathies run in that direction, but his administration has little to show in the way of accomplishments; bumbling in the first years, Clinton's presidency has been engrossed, at least since 1994, with his personal survival, so that his having avoided impeachment looks to be the great achievement of the Clinton years.

This relative victory, however, has only underlined the need for American conservatives to demonize the president in the interest of protecting what's left of their characteristic illusion. Clinton has embraced and taken credit for balancing the budget, welfare reform, and a reduction in the size of government. A president whose fortunes turn on America's very uneven prosperity, Mr. Clinton has become even more enthusiastic about free trade and market economics, with barely a gesture toward trade unions or human rights. And in Clinton's economic turn rightward, conservatives are forced toward the terrifying truth that the market, left to itself, panders to desire and undermines social institutions, teaching relativism more effectively than legions of the most seductive intellectuals. In its devotion to individualism and unregulated change, the right has been savaging the values and virtues it professes to love, so perhaps it is appropriate that congressional Republicans have chosen to fall on their swords.

For Democrats, by contrast, the president's travail has been

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magical: Opposing Ken Starr's Grand Guignol has made the party's crazy quilt look like a tapestry. For a long time, most Democrats have been variously unhappy with the president, finding fault with him as a person, as a political leader, or both. There isn't a lot of enthusiasm for Bill Clinton these days—and Democrats in Congress have wisely declined to embrace the notion that the president is entitled to an inviolable private life—but the differences within the party have become largely invisible. The contest for the presidential nomination in 2000, which might have been a fracturing combat between Old Democrats and New, now looks like a walk for Al Gore. Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.), a splendid leader during the impeachment battle, has decided to pursue the speakership rather than the presidency, leaving Bill Bradley—as a candidate, a cure for insomnia—the vice-president's only major rival.

Once the trial is over, however, party unity will get dicier, with the odds against the Democrats coming through on their professed eagerness to deal with other looming issues. They will need to remember the argument they offered against the president's accusers, that the effort to overturn the result of a democratic election is a graver matter, constitutionally, than all of Bill Clinton's slitherings. Despite the encroachments of a politics pursued through litigation and administration—symbolized by the Paula Jones case and its aftermath—self-government by equal citizens, and hence majority rule, is the republic's bedrock. It needs defending against the multiplying inequalities of the time. The Democrats, for a wonder, have managed this time to escape from the cave of Cyclops; it remains to be seen whether they can find their way home. □

In the Orchard

After George Washington,
At a quite early age,
Destroyed the famous cherry,
The country could never
Be innocent again.

This made matters simpler
For all the generations
Of horny politicians
Who, suitless, followed suit.

John Nixon, Jr.

Don Wycliff

ONE OF OURS

Bill Clinton & African-Americans

One of the best homilies I've heard in recent years was given on the Feast of the Holy Family in my parish church, Saint Mary's, in Evanston, Illinois. Father Chuck LaChance was reflecting on the day's Gospel reading, in which Saint Matthew related how Joseph came to accept Mary as his wife, despite the surprising and distressing discovery that she already was "with child."

Assured in a dream that it was "by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child," Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord had directed him and received her into his home as his wife."

"It's interesting to note," LaChance observed, "that the life of the Savior began in what most people would think of as a disaster."

That observation—and Joseph's saintly example of faith and acceptance—keeps coming back to me as I reflect on what some people consider the surprising and remarkable support that African-Americans have given President Bill Clinton from Day One of his Lewinsky troubles. It's really not that surprising or remarkable if you appreciate that "disasters" like Jesus are so common as to be almost routine among black Americans. And so, for that matter, is the kind of response manifested by Saint Joseph.

I have only my anecdotal observations to support this statement, but I suspect it would be hard to find an extended black family gathered for Thanksgiving dinner in the United States that conforms perfectly to the common ideal: Every child conceived in wedlock; no single mothers; no "love children"; every husband perfectly faithful to his wife and vice versa. (I suspect it would be hard to find such a family of any ethnicity, but we black folks seem to have less trouble admitting it.)

For a host of reasons, all stemming in one way or another from our tragic history as a people in this nation, we seem to have learned that life, especially family life and the sexual behaviors and emotional attachments that underlie it, are seldom simple and clean and perfectly orderly. On the contrary, they are almost always complicated and ambiguous and untidy. But the result, always, is family.

When I was growing up in rural East Texas, it was not uncommon, as we drove around the community, for the old folks to wave to someone sitting on a front porch or trudging down a dusty road and then tell us children, "That's your cousin." When we'd ask how they fit into the family tree, it often became clear that they weren't from one of the main branches, but had been grafted on somehow. Somebody—usually a male—had strayed off the straight and narrow and that person, that "cousin," was the result. The relationship was known and acknowledged, and the person was almost

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always cared for and included. And when the family gathered, they were invited. Because they were family.

It's not just because he is a Southerner who talks often and with such obvious sincerity about racial justice and fairness that black people cotton to Clinton. It's not just because, in the face of a furious right-wing assault, he said that we should "mend, not end" affirmative action. It's not just because his presidency has seen unprecedented prosperity and economic advancement for black Americans. It's not just those things, though all of them help. What most accounts for the African-American attachment to Bill Clinton is the perception that, in some way at some deeply spiritual level, he is one of us. He is, in a sense, family.

Clinton's own family background certainly is part of it: the traveling salesman father who apparently was not fastidious in his adherence to his marriage vows; the putative half-brother who apparently was fathered by Bill's wayward dad; the widowed mom who scuffled to raise her two boys and survive a relationship with an alcoholic second husband; the drug-addict younger brother who somehow pulled through, and the boy Bill himself, bright, charming, determined to succeed in the world but never, it seems, blessed with a male role model worthy of the name. It could be the story of any number of black people, any number of black families.

What makes Clinton special is that, unlike so many other white people, he never tried to deny or paper over this untidy family background. (Look at the denial that has surrounded Thomas Jefferson and his paternity of Sally Hemings's children for the last two centuries.) He couldn't have. His mother was too much her own person for him to have hidden her away, even had he been so inclined. Besides, why should he have? She had raised a president of the United States, and that's a distinction even very few blue-blooded families can claim.

He handled the revelation of his previously unknown "half-brother" with the kind of grace and decency one ought to—after all, it was no reflection on him in any case. And as for his younger brother, he seems to have been a helpful, protective big brother. No embarrassment. This was family.

So when it developed that Clinton had strayed from his marriage vows, I suspect it was neither surprising to most African-Americans nor disillusioning. After all, it happens. Remember, the life of the Savior of us all began in just such a dubious, difficult circumstance.

It also was not difficult, I suspect, for most African-Americans to believe Clinton when he said that, despite his moral failing, he desperately loved his wife. Such emotional paradox also is part of life. It's not always neat and tidy. In fact, it most often isn't. But again, that's what family is about.

So it is no surprise that African-Americans have remained loyal to and supportive of Clinton more than any other group. His life, his background, is a lot like ours as a people. And the attitude is, "Well, Bill, you've gone and messed up. But come on in and take a seat at the table. You're still family." □

Don Wycliff *is the editorial page editor of the* Chicago Tribune.

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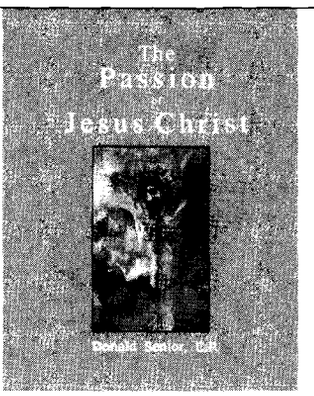

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THE ART OF GIVING

A Lenten exchange

Almsgiving is one of the oldest spiritual practices enjoined by all of the world's religions, and most especially in penitential seasons. It is a spiritual discipline because it is almost always difficult to part with one's own goods—whether coins or food, whether from surplus or from substance. Once upon a time, the outstretched hand of the widow or orphan, the begging bowl of a wandering monk, the man beaten and left for dead by the side of the road made the need dramatically apparent. But today, at least in many parts of the developed world, if the need does not present itself so immediately, it is announced in an excess of begging letters crammed indifferently into our mailboxes. Does this make our almsgiving more or less difficult, more or less examined than when we occasionally encounter the outstretched hand on city streets?

People think very differently about how and to whom to make charitable contributions. Indeed, just thinking about giving away our goods sometimes seems a harder penitential practice than actually doing it. We asked our four respondents to reflect on these issues: How do you decide to whom (or what) you should give? Do you have criteria? Or not? How do you sort through many obviously worthy causes? How do some come to seem more compelling to you than others?

Rembert G. Weakland

Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B., is the archbishop of Milwaukee.

After becoming a bishop, I was astonished by the number of begging letters I began to receive. The *Official Catholic Directory*, called the "*Kenedy Directory*," must serve as a ready list for every charitable organization in the world. Clearly many groups take the *Directory* and write to every bishop in the country. Because of the frequent wrong addresses or the wrong name of the current bishop, I soon began a game of trying to guess the date of the *Directory* being used. (I often wondered how many old *Directories* were sold in India!) Early on I realized that one of my predecessors, Cardinal Albert Meyer (1903–65) must have contributed to many causes, since many requests came addressed to him. None ever came to his predecessor, Archbishop Moses Elias Kiley (1876–1953). The name may have scared them away.

I am sure that future bishops will not have to worry about many coming to Rembert Weakland. Long ago I decided that most of my charitable contributions would be given to individual people and not to institutions. Why? Probably it was a *gut* decision and not a *brain* one. Perhaps I share some of that lack of trust in institutions that the younger generation exhibits. I do not mind giving to institutions if I have had direct contact with them and their work. Anonymous requests, as good as they are packaged, do not move me.

In giving to people directly, however, I know that often I am taken in. I listen to every hard-luck story as if it were the first time I ever heard it. When I was newly ordained and sent to Juilliard in New York to study, I spent the first summer at Saint Philip Neri Parish on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. One Sunday afternoon when I was on duty, an elderly, very disheveled, gentleman rang the doorbell. He wanted to speak to the young Benedictine, as he had some problems with Abbot Cuthbert Butler's book, *Benedictine Monasticism*. I waxed eloquent in responding to every query. In the end he asked for two dollars and fifty cents to get a bite to eat. After giving him the money, I probed more deeply. He confessed that he had gone to the public library, taken out the first book under "Benedictine Order," read a few pages, and rang the doorbell. The grapevine had the word out, he explained, that a new young Benedictine monk was stationed at Saint Philip's. People like that really work for a living and deserve a handout.

More often, however, I have been taken-in in more serious ways, but by now I am used to being conned and accept that it is inevitable in all charitable giving. If only a portion given is helpful, that is enough.

Finally, I am a softy for musical causes. Oh well, we all have our weaknesses.

Lynn C. Isbell

Lynn C. Isbell teaches English in a Catholic high school in San Francisco.

My parents brought me up to understand that charitable giving was an obligation of Christians. They acted accordingly, and, as they were wealthy, the results were obvious in our community. Living in Utah, where the majority belonged to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, I learned the word "tithe," very early. My parents assured me that Catholics also practiced this type of almsgiving, and for those blessed with money, 10 percent was hardly enough. Inspired by this, I several times cast into the collection the silver dollar I found in my Christmas stocking—trying not to think of the fabulous yoyo (with three rhinestones) that cost only sixty cents. The choices were so simple.

A more recent part of my life has informed my current thinking. For many years, I tried to keep solvent an advocacy organization for mentally handicapped people. I sank to the depths once by employing a "boiler-room" operation in which solicitors interrupted people's dinners to sell them tickets to events they would surely not want to attend. My boiler-room agency was one of the best; half of the funds went to the charity, an astronomical percentage. I was ashamed of myself, but since we were on the point of bankruptcy, and, since I thought the organization essential, I shuddered and signed the contract. During this phase of my life I also learned how wonderful it is to receive a check for fifty dollars or, once, even a hundred dollars in response to a request for ten. All of this resulted in my first law of giving: Favor the charities that are small and struggling because they

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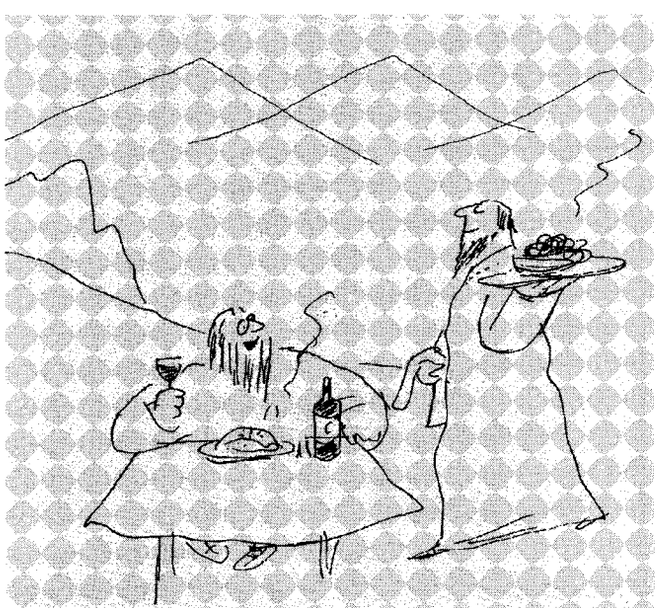
need help more. There is a corollary: Favor the charity where you contribute your time and energy. You have the best chance of assuring that your contribution will reach the intended recipients. Knowing what I know about telephone solicitations and how large a percentage usually goes for overhead, I almost never respond to them—though, in recognition of my shady past, I try to be polite

I favor local efforts to serve the poor; the soup kitchen where I've worked takes precedence over the soup kitchen in another town. I avoid large national and international charities. Their executive directors seem grossly overpaid and their overhead huge. One of these received an irate letter from me about its practice of sending an envelope with a stamp on it by return mail whenever they acknowledged a previous donation. If they can waste thirty-three cents, they don't need me. I apply the same premise to charities that send out glossy appeals, videotapes, coffee mugs, and other "gifts."

Lifelong lover of the arts though I am, I reserve the bulk of my alms for the poor. "Supporting the ballet" is not one of the works of mercy. I live in a city where people are eager for the social prominence that comes with supporting the arts, so my contributions go to less fashionable causes. But, since art is a genuine need for all of us, I do make an effort to help arts organizations until they get greedy (as they so often do) and come back for more. Then I revise.

I also set money aside especially for organizations that mainly irritate politicians into doing right by the poor; because they "lobby" for change they don't qualify for tax-deductible donations. The politicians themselves? Never.

When I do throw appeals into the trash, I always hope I'm being fair and that not everybody is throwing away the same appeals. And I never feel as if there is enough money, enough time, or enough energy to go around.



"You are a great Samaritan!"

John Lynch

John Lynch lives in Framingham, Massachusetts. His "Loaded and Fired Machine Gun..." appeared in the April 24, 1998 Commonweal.

In *Commonweal* in the fall of 1952, I published a short wartime remembrance, "A Town along the Way," about my days as a soldier in Italy in 1944, below Rome and northward. The town was Fondi, where in the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas had lived and taught and where, turning off the ancient Via Appia into the Aurunci Mountains on a late May afternoon, I for the first time came under German fire.

After the article appeared, I received touching letters from readers, among them two with hundred-dollar checks made out to me, asking that the donations go to Italian relief. One specified that the money be sent directly to Fondi. I had no contacts there; then I remembered Catholic Relief Services. I called from Detroit and reached Eileen Egan (she was a companion of Dorothy Day's and has written of Mother Teresa), who promised that, once the checks were signed over and received, the money would be on its way. Indeed, one gift was channeled through to the hospital in Fondi.

Fifty-plus years after Fondi, CARE in its literature estimates that ten dollars "can help thirty-five hungry and malnourished children per day around the world." Food for the Poor states that a like amount "will buy fifty pounds of beans and rice, providing a meal of complete protein for 1,200 children" in Latin America, and twenty-five dollars (about the price of a box of Godiva chocolates) "will buy enough food to keep a poor family of six alive for nearly a year." Oxfam America assures us that twenty-five dollars "will provide two dairy cows for a farmer in rural India" and fifty dollars "will enable a Cambodian village to erect a small irrigation dam to improve rice production." Oxfam also notes, without emphasis, that "today, 35,000 children will die as a result of hunger and malnutrition."

How does one balance death by starvation against the need for a cow, an irrigation dam, the battle to defeat AIDS in Angola? Here at home, how to reconcile a cot in a winter shelter, education for Native Americans, saving a Michigan woodland, printing a prolife brochure, pumping up a university endowment, a possible cure for cancer?

In South Dakota, how did the Lakota Sioux get my name? In South Africa, the Catholic bishop? For that matter, the bishop of Anchorage? Franciscan Missions, Salesian Missions, Oblate Missions, Medical Mission Sisters, Sisters of Saint Joseph, Dominican Sisters of Caldwell? In a solicitation from the Salvation Army, quoting from *Forbes*, we learn that more than 600,000 charitable organizations in the United States (religious, medical, educational, social-minded, cultural, environmental, "other") took in $120 billion last year. The figures confound me.

The Cardinal's Appeal, Fireman's Fund, Witness for Peace, Massachusetts Citizens for Life, Massachusetts Audubon, UNICEF, CARE, D.A.R.E., MADD, SMOC, SMARC, NPR/WGBH, Boston Rescue League, Boston Symphony, Bread for the World, Pro-

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ject Bread, Operation Hunger, Toys for Tots, Knights of Columbus, Genesis Fund, Lions, Rotary, Arthritis Foundation, Multiple Sclerosis, Veterans Outreach, Paralyzed Veterans, Christian Appalachian Project, Red Cross, Easter Seals, Cancer Society, Heart Association, American Friends Service Committee, Friends of NCR, Sons of Mary, Maryknoll, Advocates, Samaritans, March of Dimes, Wilderness Society, Nature Conservancy, Big Brother-Big Sister, Pine Street Inn, Rosie's Place, Association for Retarded Citizens, Save the Children, Catholic Charities, Catholic Worker, Catholic Relief Services, Special Olympics, Children's Hospital, Jimmy Fund, Detroit Catholic Central, Nativity Prep, Notre Dame, Propagation of the Faith. My "in" basket overflows. Too often my "out" basket slips into quiescence. I procrastinate. Under the onslaught my charity becomes sporadic and sometimes nonexistent for months.

Over time I drift from scrupulosity to sensitivity to apathy. I hear in my brain: "Charity begins at home." I hear in my gut: "Charity begins where it is needed most."

Judith Johnson O'Brien

Judith Johnson O'Brien is past chair of Catholic Family Center in Rochester, New York. She currently lives in Vermont.

I would like to boast that I have charitable giving down to a rational process. Let's see! First, I take seriously each request. (I confess that glossy, expensive, and frequent solicitations are offputting and usually quickly end in the wastebasket.) Next I ask myself a list of questions about the request: Is it (1) an immediate need, a crisis (flood relief, a local family's loss); (2) an ongoing commitment (hospital, volunteer fire department, home health service, food shelf, parish, diocese); (3) an organization that enriches the mind and soul (the Catholic Worker, area museums, and the Vermont Symphony); (4) a cause that advances values I hold (Women's Ordination Conference, American Friends Service Committee, particular religious congregations, colleges, and universities)? An overriding question may be: Will my gift make a difference?

I'm not finished. The next step in my rational-giving process is to identify my personal connection (which often tips the scale in favor of one good cause rather than another). For example, to be faithful to family and neighbors, to remember a special group of people to whom I feel indebted, and those activities in which I volunteer my time and talents. I admit that the motives of self-applause and advancement do dwell in the back of my mind at times and must gently be dealt with. The final piece of my discernment process centers on prioritizing: What is most important from a long list?

Does all of this take a lot of time? I suppose so, but as the years progress I'm "easing" into it, "letting go." What I finally do is rational only on the surface. The process is held together by something very different. The work I make for myself each time a request crosses my desk becomes more and more a "holy discipline" and less and less a question of all those sensible considerations. Dorothy Day was chided by friends when she would give money to any beggar she chanced to meet on the street. Just not rational; the beggar will probably waste the few pennies on drink or drugs. Dorothy countered that one needs to be gracious to what the moment offers—and God's presence is everywhere, wherever. The holy in my discipline is God's constant presence in the one who asks. Giving is finally within grace. Thus whenever I open a solicitation letter from our community action group or *Commonweal*, I trust that the person of God and his love are wonderfully present. "Awesome," as the young people would say. □

justina

she was the mischievous one
with her mass of black hair
and this was her interpreter
teaching her that word
she said the most described her

it is hard to imagine
so cheerful a woman
hiding in a gully at the riverbank
after coming three days with the wounded
three days through the rain forest
and then the helicopters
searching them out with machine guns
six-barreled that could level
an illinois cornfield in one pass
but justina did survive
this friend of rigoberta menchu

her people were the usual communists
as the reports would have it
but in truth they were a people
native to the foot of the cross
and their land was too valuable
all that they had ever held as their own
and how did it happen the helicopters
came to the rivers of guatemala
and who was it that sent them there

but I want to move along
come to the business of the prayers
yes and they always have to be
prayers against the self as I know
but justina was firm about this
telling us that when you pray
put your candle in the center
and the light will be everywhere

John Knoepfle

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Celia Wren

LOVE IN THE RUINS

'The Blue Room' & 'Phèdre'

It *is* blue. Audiences who were underwhelmed by *The Blue Room*—the London-born Nicole Kidman vehicle that landed on Broadway this winter to hype of NASA-scale proportions—have to credit it with truth-in-advertising, at least to this extent. David Hare's mildly risqué drama has caused such a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic, due to its high-profile leading lady and her onstage dishabille, that it hardly bears analyzing as a production at all—first and foremost, it has been a phenomenon, along the lines of melatonin, or the Spice Girls.

Nevertheless, anyone who actually managed to see the play, which is an updating of Arthur Schnitzler's turn-of-the-century classic *La Ronde*, can testify to the color. The show's two actors flesh out the ungainly truths of human passion against a backdrop and on a stage that are decidedly blue. Bars of red and blue neon, crooked from the proscenium, complete the set's three walls with the hint of a fourth, emphasizing the play's sole message: we are all imprisoned within our sexuality.

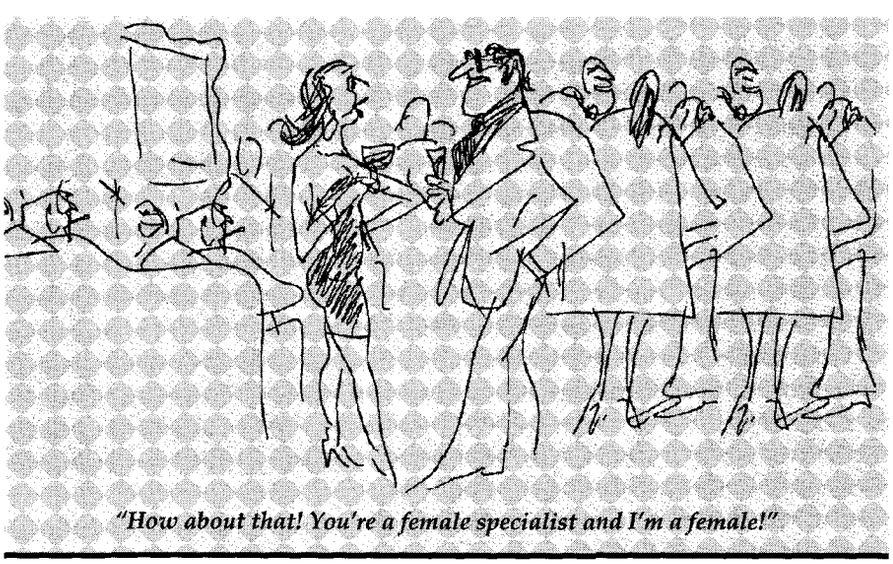
The theme is embedded in a conceit so high-concept it is actually geometric. Two actors (Kidman and Iain Glen) portray a linked series of lovers—a prostitute solicits a taxi driver, who seduces an *au pair*, who accepts the attentions of her employer's son, who lures a married woman to an assignation, and so on, until finally the daisy chain loops back on itself, arriving once again at the prostitute. This ironic symmetry gives the audience a sort of bird's-eye view on human passion, which begins to seem ridiculous and slightly pathetic.

This elegant structure, which implies world-weary cynicism as surely as a circle implies π, ultimately prevents the play from advancing on any other front. The discontinuity of the narrative and the narrow focus on one aspect of human experience—sex—undermine the characterizations and frustrate theatrical tension. One might be vaguely curious about the self-important politician (Glen with a paunch and Scottish accent) who finds himself doing drugs in a motel room with a dim-witted teen-age model (Kidman in a miniskirt, boots, and fishnet stockings), but, like all the play's scenarios, the encounter seems arbitrary; there is no point in wondering whether the politician's behavior will collapse a government or devastate his sweet, adulterous wife (a demure Kidman in a white nightgown), because the story seems to have no reality beyond the spotlight.

Moreover, Hare, the acclaimed author of plays like *Racing Demon* and *Skylight*, has failed, or perhaps didn't bother, to give his ten lusting couples dialogue that is interesting of itself. Bursts of color feel like an awkward bid for topicality ("Madonna wears one!" the politician's wife says defensively, defending her black negligee to her gangly lover). And occasional philosophical musings trail off lamely, too fitful and desultory to generate the noncarnal resonances the play sorely needs. "Do you think any of us is just one person?" muses a brittle aristocrat (Glen with a pinstripe suit and slicked-back hair), but this metaphysical speculation seems fuzzy, and ultimately meaningless, compared to the ruthless precision of serial courtship.

As directed by Sam Mendes (who also staged the current Broadway *Cabaret*, another Anglo-American smash), Kidman and Glen struggle gamely to give the production some dramatic substance. With a workmanlike thoroughness, they alter their diction and mannerisms for each new role—for example, Kidman drops her voice at least half an octave and adopts a suitably tailored upper-class accent to portray an affected starlet who carries a teddy bear to surreptitious trysts.

Such faultless chameleonism notwithstanding, none of the episodes of lovemaking seem connected to a larger reality, a flaw that ultimately undermines the governing circle motif. The snake-with-its-tail-in-its-mouth image is meaningless as a pure abstraction; it unnerves us only when we imagine it to be a real phenomenon. But Hare's scenes feel quarantined from life; compared to Max Ophuls's richly textured 1950 film *La Ronde*, which follows its lovers' relay through the social strata and ornate interiors of a romantic Vienna, *The Blue Room* has the stagy flatness of pop-up book.



"How about that! You're a female specialist and I'm a female!"

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Just as the force of the *ronde* motif diminishes when disconnected from a world, so the interest of *The Blue Room* pales when the production is considered apart from its context. More intriguing than script, performances, or directorial touches are the parallels and contrasts between *The Blue Room*'s early circumstances and those of Schnitzler's original. Conscious of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna's stifling mores, Schnitzler initially distributed a private edition only to friends, in 1903; early stagings, from 1912 on, provoked riots and banning. Hare, on the other hand, saw his play vault to the cover of *Newsweek*, and earned himself a profile in the *New York Times Magazine.*

Of course, you could say both playwrights wrote in an atmosphere of millennial malaise. Schnitzler faced the birth throes of modernism, the death throes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Freud's innovations, and impending European disaster. Hare, and the rest of us, have the Y2K problem.

The anxieties of a transitional age pervaded another recent dramatization of passion: Jean Racine's *Phèdre*, performed by Britain's Almeida Theatre, using a subtly eloquent new translation by Ted Hughes (subsequently published in book form by Farrar, Straus and Giroux). The production (directed by Jonathan Kent) touched down briefly at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in January.

The Athens depicted in this seventeenth-century French tragedy is poised on the verge of a new dispensation: its longtime king, Theseus (Julian Glover, in the Almeida production), is missing in action. His restless heir, Hippolytus (Toby Stephens), feels excluded from the age of glory. "My story contains not one monster," he complains in the play's first scene, measuring himself against his father, who vanquished the Minotaur and other epic-style villains.

The ensuing tale of tortured, illicit love unwinds just beyond mythology's border. Phèdre (a rather wooden Diana Rigg), who lusts after her stepson, but conspires to accuse him falsely after Theseus's return, finds that she has become the monster that was missing from Hippolytus' story. "My own craving fills me with horror," she says, and throughout the tragedy, infatuation inspires self-disgust.

In the Almeida's extraordinarily wrong-headed staging, in which actors rarely looked at the people they were speaking to, this disgust was given physical expression by a massive palace wall whose corner protruded in *trompe l'oeil* perspective. (At one point, two characters actually conducted an intimate *tête-à-tête* from opposite sides of the corner.) This telling bit of masonry, which made the show as physically cramped as it was emotionally shallow, testified grotesquely to sexuality as confinement—a bloated, terrifying version of the walls only hinted at in *The Blue Room.* Perhaps the prospect of a new millennium—another thousand years of possibility—has made us all the more aware of our own physical and emotional limitations, a ready audience for plays that show love to be a jail cell. □

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Victoria's secret

A Return to Modesty
Discovering the Lost Virtue
Wendy Shalit
The Free Press, $24, 304 pp.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

A growing body of research evidence tells us that today's young women are unhappy. They suffer from depression, eating disorders, binge drinking, and body-image disturbances. And they have trouble with men. Young women are victims of sexual harassment, date rape, and stalking, as well as lesser kinds of male discourtesy and disrespect. Many "twenty-something" women despair of finding a decent man to marry. This generation is better educated and more sexually liberated than any earlier generation of women in history. What's gone wrong?

Wendy Shalit, a twenty-three-year-old member of the first generation of young women to come of age after the sexual revolution, says that all these girl troubles can be traced to a single cause: the loss of sexual modesty.

Twenty-something women have been raised in a culture that tells them that they should lose their "hang-ups" about sex, according to Shalit. Their chief hang-up is modesty about sex. Parents, teachers, and sex educators tell teen-age girls that shyness about their body is prudish, that waiting to have sex until marriage is impossible, and that "sex is no big deal" as long as you are "responsible." This means that it's okay to lose your virginity as long as you do so with a condom.

Doing away with modesty violates women's nature, says Shalit. Women are the more modest sex for a simple reason: they bear and nurture children. They must be discerning about their mate in order to ensure the quality and likely survival of their offspring, and that discernment requires withholding sexual favors until a prospective mate proves himself worthy.

Consequently, when women surrender their modesty, they give up much of their power and prerogative in love relationships. The rhetoric of today's sexual culture is one of choice, but the reality is that women are less able to choose wisely and well. Young women complain incessantly about men's failure to commit and about the shortage of marriageable men. But when women begin to treat their virginity as trash rather than treasure, men sense their advantage: why try to please a woman when she will pleasure you?

Saddest of all, women who have casual sexual relationships cannot demand much from the men they "hook up with." In their love relationships, women want emotional as well as sexual intimacy, a meeting of the minds as well as the bodies. Modesty gives women the time to slow things down, to bank the fires of sexual desire while cultivating friendship. Indeed, modern marriage has evolved in the direction of a "best friends" relationship in deference to women's desires. But this advantage is now lost for many women. Instead, they have to lower their expectations for commitment from lifelong marriage to a "long-term relationship" to a phone call the morning after. Even then, they are often cruelly disappointed.

And what does the loss of modesty have to do with eating disorders and other body discontents? Shalit believes that sexual modesty is irrepressible. Push it down in one place and it pops up in another. If girls can't be modest about sex, then they will be modest about what they eat. If they can't be sexually pure, they will purify themselves by restricting calories or reducing fat intake or relentlessly "working out."

Much of what Shalit says is persuasive. Something has gone awry in girls' lives and it seems to be tied to the basics: biology and culture. What's more, Shalit is a fiercely intelligent and resourceful critic. She can make much out of a fashion magazine article or an encounter with one of her politically correct professors. Yet her rhetoric often outruns her evidence. For example, she claims that modesty is going to stage "a huge comeback" but she offers no evi-

"Is it enough to be 'fancy free'?"

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dence for this stunning prediction.

More serious is her failure to own up to some of the problems traditionally posed by the obligation of female modesty. After all, modesty can be misread as passivity or stupidity. Girls with downcast eyes are sometimes overlooked or underestimated. And modesty can lead to misplaced shame and silence. When I was about twelve, I went to a dentist who frequently and vigorously wiped his hands across the bib on my chest. I was too shy and embarrassed to yell at him or to tell my mother. This is not an argument in favor of immodesty, but it does suggest that modesty is a frail defense against male sexual aggression and misconduct which is why it has always been surrounded by legal sanctions, social controls, and cultural codes, most of which have now been repealed.

These traditional sanctions and codes will be difficult to restore, I suspect. Cultures with strong traditions of female sexual modesty tend to segregate the sexes in education, the workplace, and places of worship. How likely is a return to modesty in a coed youth culture where men and young women share dorms, bathrooms, and sleeping bags? Traditionally, female sexual modesty also seems to require strong parental involvement in courtship. How do we bring back courtship when young adults are living away from home as singles? Finally, traditions of modesty tend to be stronger when women marry at a young age. How do we encourage modesty when women are postponing marriage until their mid or late twenties?

That said, Shalit's book is important for two reasons. First, she offers her report from the frontlines of a culture that few older adults understand or recognize. Baby Boom parents who cheered the sexual revolution can now contemplate its impact on their daughters. Second, she is one of a small but growing band of twenty-something women writers who are disenchanted with the sexual revolution. Like the young political dissidents of the sixties, these cultural dissidents of the nineties are bent on telling the grownups where they went wrong. We should all pay heed. □

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead *is the author, most recently, of* The Divorce Culture *(Knopf).*

CRAFTSMAN TO BUTTON PUSHER

The Corrosion of Character
The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism
Richard Sennett
W. W. Norton, $23.95, 176 pp.

Eugene McCarraher

Workers no longer have "jobs," an ATT executive recently told the *New York Times*. Instead, he explained happily, they now have "projects" or "fields of work." Though this is a vintage piece of Newspeak, Richard Sennett argues in his short but compelling new book that the dictum is also a genuine mite of wisdom about the nature of work in contemporary America.

A professor of sociology at New York University and the London School of Economics, Sennett has long been a provocative but not always lucid student of the impact of capitalism on personal identity. His first book, The *Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972), was a memorable examination of the psychic and moral tolls exacted by the work ethic. Yet much of Sennett's work after *Injuries*, while more ambitious in scope, also suffered from conceptual and literary muddle. Now, returning to the personal interviews that made *Injuries* so powerful, a cogent and readable Sennett tells us more about the degeneration of "character" in America than all the flatulent moralizing of William Bennett.

For Sennett, "character" is the capacity to make and keep commitments—not just in marriage, but in friendships, communities, and workplaces—and the ability to provide continuous, coherent narratives of personal experience. In Sennett's view, the "new capitalism"—the world of "flexibility" and "reinvention" in labor markets, work schedules, institutions, and technology—renders "character" impossible. Ready to turn on a dime in response to new markets and technologies, contemporary capitalism demolishes the social and cultural foundations of "character," and upholds instead the punishing ideal of incessant metamorphosis.

By way of contrast, Sennett looks back unsentimentally to the regime of work and production that reigned in corporate America for three decades after World War II: "Fordism," in the terminology Sennett borrows from historians and sociologists. Though rightly bemoaned as constricting and "conformist," the Fordist world of the blue-collar stiff and the gray-flannel suit preserved a predictable connection between labors and rewards. It also featured hierarchies which, however rigid, defined power relations, responsibilities, and obligations. Ironically, Sennett notes, these routines marked out "an arena of empowerment" in which workers forged bonds of solidarity, resisted managerial fiat, and asserted their own demands. Moreover, Fordist rules and rhythms, while they could numb the mind and body, also enabled workers to "beget narratives" that lifted their routinized labor from drudgery into coherence, dignity, and community.

The new, "post-Fordist" regime lauds all things unpredictable, lightweight, and "flexible." The new capitalism is the just-in-time world of temp work, flextime, user-friendly technologies, and small, infinitely rearrangeable workforces. As Sennett demonstrates, the Kingdom of Customer Service begets not the bonds and narratives of "character," but rather indifference, lassitude, and personal decomposition. "User-friendly" technology, for instance (when it isn't surveilling workers more closely than ever before),

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erodes the dedication, workmanship, and identity acquired through mastering difficult tasks. As one button-pushing young worker in a computerized bakery sums it up for Sennett, "I'm not really a baker"—leaving himself and Sennett unclear as to who or what he is.

At the same time, smaller, flexible, and mobile workforces, while they require employees to cultivate valuable interpersonal skills, also inhibit the establishment of durable bonds. The new entrepreneur (embodied most clearly for Sennett in the geeky mendacity of Bill Gates) espouses a "willingness to destroy what he has made, given the demands of the immediate moment," and idealizes "the ability to let go, if not to give." This characterless ideal filters down to the cubicles. As a result, instead of the strong-willed people who picketed factories and supported progressive social and political movements, the new capitalism spawns battalions of diffident helots who lack the will and imagination to break their gossamer shackles. These days, "Wobbly" denotes the new worker's backbone, not his politics.

Sennett also deftly dissects the specious locutions of the managerial elite. Despite his contention that the new capitalism is an "illegible regime of power," Sennett proves an adept reader and translator of its ideological lexicon: "flexibility," "facilitation," "empowerment," and "teamwork." This *faux*-democratic discourse camouflages power, Sennett argues, with a phony and demeaning egalitarianism. Deflecting or denying all resistance and confrontation, the manager (excuse me, "facilitator" or "team leader") strengthens elite control by mastering "the art of wielding power without being held accountable."

Sennett concludes with an indictment of the new capitalism as an unprecedented assault on the dignity of the human person. Of course, he concedes, capitalism always was such; but because the new system of disposability "radiates indifference" so baldly, it cannot continue to claim that its contributions to material wealth "make up" for what are charitably referred to as its "faults." Drawing on Paul Ricoeur, Sennett implies that since "in order to be reliable, we must feel needed," and since "for us to feel needed, this Other must be needy," we must create a political economy of genuinely democratic interdependence, one that enables workers to achieve character in a new regime of predictability.

Clearly, the "new capitalism" possesses what many regard as attractive features. Purporting to value individual judgment and initiative, it strikes those indomitably libertarian chords in American culture which are indispensable to any vibrant democracy. Moreover, its ideal of mobility encourages a cosmopolitanism which, at its best, promotes disdain for bigotry. Still, Sennett might remind the upbeat among us that this seasoned self-direction, when it is not spurious, remains the privilege of a professional and managerial elite.

Indeed, the mellow but pervasive bleakness of the picture Sennett paints overwhelms his lame political conclusion. By his own description, postindustrial itineracy weakens or prevents

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those bonds necessary, not only for character, but for movements that could stay the whirlwinds of capital. Moreover, the prosperity and stability of American capitalism in the three decades after 1945 rested on conditions that are either badly eroded, gone forever, or dubious: a formidable labor movement, uncontested military and economic preeminence, and high military spending, to cite a few.

Once we appreciate the historical anomaly of the postwar moment, we might see the capitalism of our own day in a proper light. With its imperious bosses, its overworked employees, and its benediction of uncomplaining servility to the prerogatives of money and power, the "new capitalism" emerges as the same old monster it always was, just larger, faster, and colder at heart than ever. □

Eugene McCarraher *teaches American history at the University of Delaware. His book,* All Things New: Christianity, Social Thought, and Cultural Criticism in Modern America, *will be published in spring, 2000, by Cornell University Press.*

AGAIN 'NEVER AGAIN'

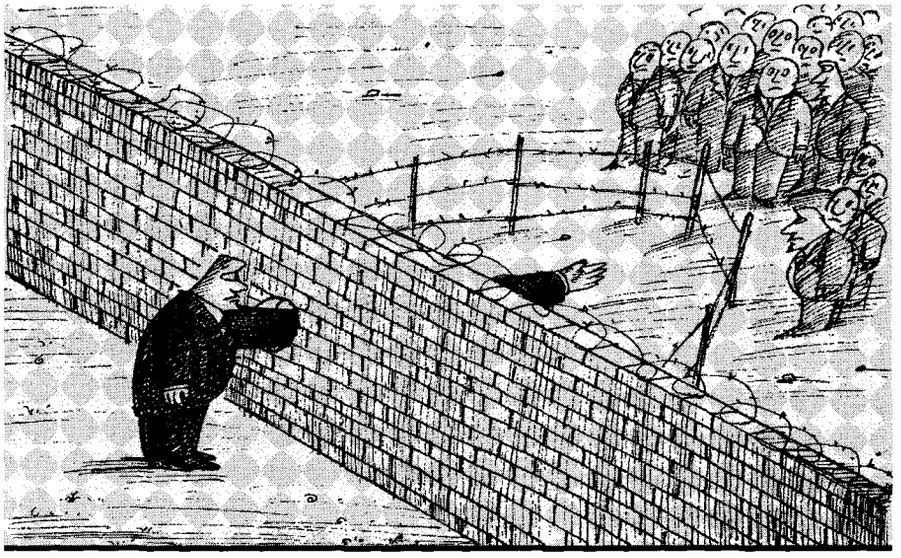
We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Shall Be Killed with Our Families
Stories from Rwanda
Philip Gourevitch
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $25, 356 pp.

John Langan

Philip Gourevitch, who has written extensively on Rwanda for the *New Yorker*, gives us a lengthy and elliptical title that calls out for some explanation. This the reader will find on page 42, in a letter written by seven Adventist pastors who, along with their families and two thousand others, had taken refuge in a church and hospital complex at Mugonero in western Rwanda during the genocidal onslaught that swept the central African nation in 1994. The president of their church, who later fled to the United States, responded to their plea, "Your problem has already found a solution. You must die."

The ministers and their families were massacred the following day. Police officers who had previously guarded them joined their attackers.

This shocking betrayal and abandonment by a trusted church leader is a poignant detail in one of the most desolate and blood-soaked landscapes in the history of humanity, a genocide that killed 1 million people. As Gourevitch convincingly demonstrates, the killings were no accidental or impulsive event. Rwanda did not have the massive machinery of death or the bureaucratic schedules of the Holocaust, but the genocide was fomented and orchestrated with the same fiendish effectiveness. The staggering death toll was the sum of many local events, a slaughter in which the killers, often the victims' neighbors, were urged on by radio announcers and shadowy messengers. Gourevitch dismisses economic factors or overpopulation as possible motives. Although Rwanda had more than 8 million people living in an area the size of Maryland (that's a population density of more than 800 to the square mile), it was well situated economically and had an enviable history as a recipient of foreign aid. As Gourevitch's account makes plain, the killing was planned by people who knew perfectly well what they were doing. They worked within a paranoid culture where fear, passivity, and conformity made it nearly impossible for individuals to resist the orders of those who spoke in the name of authority.



Gourevitch identifies those responsible as the *genocidaires*, proponents of Hutu power who had gathered around the regime of General Juvenal Habyarimana. Habyarimana came to power in 1973 and ruled Rwanda as a dictator until being killed, along with the president of Burundi, in a spectacular and suspicious plane crash on April 6, 1994. The death of Habyarimana launched the genocide, and the *genocidaires* continued to be active even after the Hutu government was overthrown in July 1994 by Tutsi rebels supported by Uganda. Subsequently, the Hutu killers went on to establish miniregimes of fear and violence in refugee camps, especially in Zaire.

Gourevitch emphatically repudiates the suggestion of any rough moral equivalence between the actions of the Hutu and Tutsi during the 1994 civil war. With a few notable exceptions, the Hutus were the perpetrators. Looking

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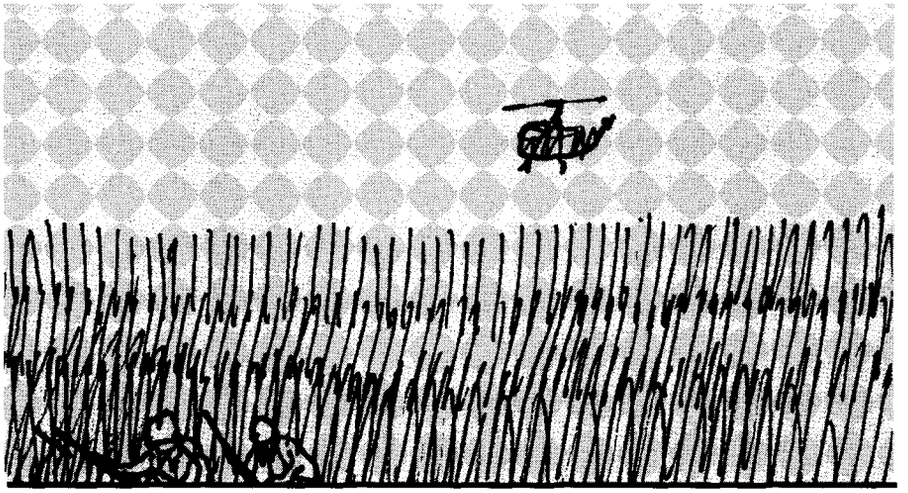
beyond Rwanda, Gourevitch condemns the United States for its neglect of Africa in the aftermath of the 1991 killing of U.S. soldiers in Somalia. The United Nations' persistent inability to agree on realistic and flexible instructions for its troops is also roundly criticized. Worse, UN personnel observed and even facilitated massacres of refugees and other victims. But whatever the timidity and incompetence of the UN and United States, neither could measure up to the craven behavior of France, a sanctimonious jackal that supplied arms and legitimacy to the lethal Hutu regime in the hope of procuring favor.

We Wish to Inform You is readable and moving. Gourevitch is an impassioned and thoughtful observer. But this is not a work that gives much pleasure or comfort. Nor are its arguments foolproof, its evidence complete, or its documentation thorough. Its chronology also can be difficult to follow. Still, Gourevitch does struggle to come close to a great mystery of evil, and he makes us attend to great crimes. This kind of attention must be the beginning of any new and morally sound U.S. policy in the region. That policy must pay attention to the stresses and vulnerabilities of the local cultures, to the real political and moral differences among the contending parties, to the appalling sufferings of the victims, and the abiding trauma of Rwandan society. The failure of Christianity in what was the most heavily Christianized country in Africa raises other, alas all-too-familiar and sobering, questions.

For those whose actions helped the *genocidaires* to carry out their criminal project, or whose inaction allowed victims to be devastated by the forces of injustice and cruelty, contrition is long overdue. In the case of Rwanda, as in the case of European Jewry, there should emerge a clear and vigorous international consensus: "Never again." Faced in the future with such monstrous evil, the international community must possess the solidarity to send humanitarian aid, and when necessary, initiate military intervention. □

John Langan, S.J., *teaches at the Rose Kennedy School of Ethics, Georgetown University.*



LITERATURE IN A HURRY

Reporting Vietnam
Part 1, American Journalism, 1959–69
Library of America, 858 pages, $35

Reporting Vietnam
Part 2, American Journalism, 1969–75
Library of America, 957 pages, $35.

Raymond A. Schroth

It was "a quiet evening in the sleepy little town of Bien Hoa twenty miles north of Saigon....The presence of the Americans symbolized one of the main reasons why South Vietnam, five years ago a new nation with little life expectancy, is still independent and free and getting stronger all the time." In classic Henry Lucian July, 1959, *Time*style, the Library of America opens its two-volume anthology of reporting on the war in Vietnam with an artifact from the museum of journalism prose. The eight American soldiers described by *Time* write letters, play tennis, and watch a Jeanne Crain movie, when "six Communist terrorists" creep out of the darkness and let fly a "murderous hail of bullets." Two Americans die—the first of 58,000 Americans to die in Vietnam.

Within a few pages, however, in Stanley Karnow's article from the *Reporter* (January 19, 1961) and Homer Bigart's dispatch in the *New York Times* (February 25, 1962), it is clear that, rather than a new nation getting stronger, President Ngo Dinh Diem's regime is a corrupt dictatorship on the point of collapse, and that America is stuck in a very real war, with no end in sight.

The Library of America, beginning in 1982 with Herman Melville's *Typee, Omoo,* and *Mardi,* has republished 105 classics of American literature—including detective fiction. With the publication of *Reporting World War II* (two volumes, 1995), the best of daily and magazine journalism—long known as literature in a hurry—achieved the literary status it has long deserved.

Now these volumes on Vietnam also document—with excerpts from David Halberstam, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Michael Herr—the development of the "new journalism," which (because standard journalism could not adequately portray the emotional impact of the '60s revolution) went beyond Associated Press impersonal reporting and employed the interiority, interpretation, and cinematic techniques usually associated with fiction.

With the *New Yorker*'s Robert Shaplen, we tour Saigon, once a lovely French

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colonial city, now, due much to the American presence, swarming with whores, beggars, and profiteers. With James Michener, we reconstruct minute-by-minute the Kent State killings and shudder with disbelief when the national guardsmen actually lock live ammunition into their rifles. As Tom Buckley interviews the aging, infamous General Loan, the man photographed executing a bound prisoner during Tet—the moment the American public turned against the war—the general whips out a little pistol—and lights his cigarette. At 5:30 A.M., April 30, 1975, Bob Tammarkin, of the *Chicago Daily News*, is lifted off the U.S. Embassy roof, as the North Vietnamese tanks, trucks, and troops roll into Saigon. Below, hundreds of Vietnamese stare into the sky, waiting for the next helicopter—which will never come.

These pages have their heroes, like the unnamed soldier in Daniel Lang's *Casualties of War*, who risked his future to report his four comrades who raped and murdered a Vietnamese girl, and Specialist Fourth Class Jack C. Smith, now an ABC-TV reporter, who endured one of the most horrifying fire fights ever recorded, as men all around him—chests, bellies, arms, and heads blown away—screamed and screamed and screamed, until they bled through their mouths, passed out, woke up, screamed again, and died. But what will linger longest are the atrocities. A witness tells Seymour Hersh about My Lai: "They had them in a group standing over a ditch—just like a Nazi-type thing....One officer ordered a kid to machine-gun everybody down, but the kid just couldn't do it. He threw the machine gun down and the officer picked it up....I don't remember seeing any men in the ditch. Mostly women and kids."

The editors, not offering an introduction or explaining the rationale behind their choices—newspaper, magazines, book excerpts, and one TV commentary, Walter Cronkite's 1968 post-Tet report concluding that the United States should quickly negotiate its way out—tacitly invite critics to second-guess their list. I would make room for I. F. Stone's 1964 analysis of the Tonkin Gulf incidents, Anthony Lewis's denunciations of the Nixon-Kissinger 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi, and Eric Sevareid's 1972 CBS commentary: "There does come a time when the heart must rule the head. That time is when the heart is about to break."

Recently one of my students wrote of his father's Vietnam experience: "When he went he was a thirty-day-old husband. When he came back, he was a three-hundred-and-seventy-seven-day-old murderer. And he never let himself forget that." As the father struggled to allow himself to heal, "He couldn't allow his subconscious to swallow memories of faces without skin, babies without arms, men without heads. But he also knew that he couldn't allow himself to get stuck in the past." Ideally, books like these can help heal us, if we allow them to teach.

I finished reading the World War II anthologies, whatever the sadness of lost lives and ruined cities, with some feelings of pride and hope, for many of the sacrifices had been precisely that—offerings, that a better world would emerge from the blood and rubble. But much of Vietnam journalism leaves us crushed with sadness. We suffered 58,000 American, 220,000 South Vietnamese, and 1,100,000 Vietcong and North Vietnamese military dead, plus 300,000 South and 50,000 North Vietnamese civilian dead. And then we limped away, our honor stained. Martha Gellhorn, after visiting a children's hospital, warns us in the *Ladies Home Journal* (January 1967), "Someday our children, whom we love, may blame us for dishonoring America because we did not care enough about children 10,000 miles away." And Neil Sheehan, in the *New York Times Magazine* (October 9, 1966), hopes that his country will not, in the name of some anti-Communist crusade, do this again.

Tragically, with all its sorrow, wounds, scars, and unforgiven sins, one of the few positive legacies this terrible war has left us is the literary excellence and moral outrage of the writing it inspired. □

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J., *assistant dean of Fordham College Rose Hill, visited Vietnam in 1996.*

READING THE TEA LEAVES

China's Catholics
Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society
Richard Madsen
University of California Press, $27.50, 191 pp.

Nicholas R. Clifford

Commonweal readers may already know Richard Madsen as co-author of *Habits of the Heart* (1985) which examined, among other things, the tensions between individual and communitarian values in American life. Scholars of China know him also as author and co-author of two superb studies of a south China village through the vicissitudes of the Cultural Revolution and the reforms that followed (*Chen Village* [revised edition, 1992] and *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* [1994; both University of California Press]).

As readers of *Habits* know, Madsen is committed to a democratic polity in which associations such as churches can temper the nature of rampant individualism and an unfettered market through a vision of breadth and humaneness. This same vision informs his book on Chinese Catholicism, part of a larger study undertaken by the Luce Foundation to examine whether a true civil society might emerge in China. It leads also to his somewhat pessimistic conclusions, for neither the emergence of such a society nor the church's ability to play a constructive role in its making is by any means assured. That the persecution of Chinese Catholics, both

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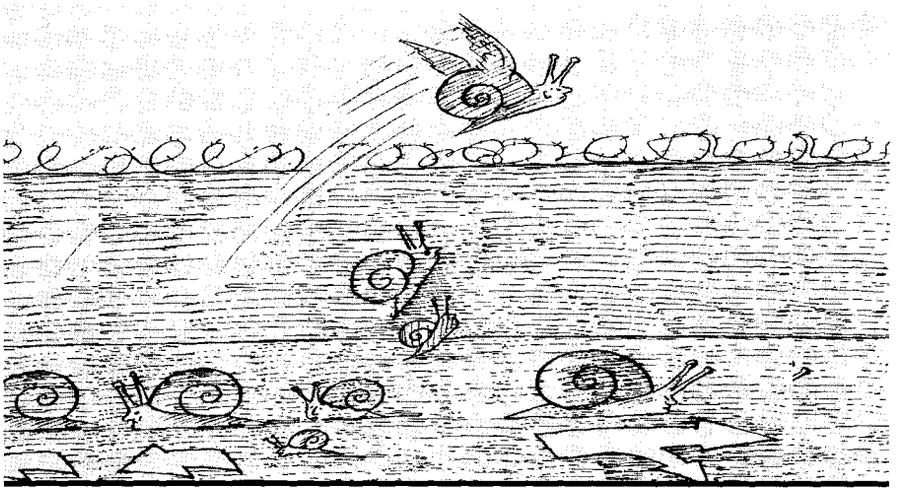
under Maoism and in its less severe form later, has hardened the resolve of most believers to maintain their faith he finds beyond dispute. He notes that since 1949 the number of Catholics has grown from roughly 3 million to 10 million, keeping pace with the larger growth of China's population. Yet in many cases the experience of those years also intensified tendencies—inherited from the Counter-Reformation theology of the earlier missionaries—toward parochialism, a dependence on hierarchy, a concern with purely personal salvation, and a fear of modernity.



Madsen (a former Maryknoll missionary in Taiwan), shows the ways in which these aspects of a particular kind of Catholicism earlier found a resonance in traditional Chinese society (Confucian, for want of a better word). Though especially true in the countryside, he suggests that even in the cities when Catholics founded colleges and universities (like Shanghai's Aurora, or Beijing's Fu Ren) the aim was not to turn out critical intellectuals (as the Protestant institutions were doing) but a patrician elite, possessors of a knowledge which it was their duty to impart to others, yet in a way that neither questioned it nor encouraged questions from others.

The paradox is that the very qualities that gave Chinese Catholics the strength to resist persecution (surely a Christian virtue) now may stand in the way of their working with others to bring about a more humane and tolerant society (surely also Christian virtues). Nor is it as if all Catholics clubbed together against a dangerous outside world, for they also turn against themselves, particularly but not exclusively in the case of the underground church and the official church (the so-called Catholic Patriotic Association, dismissed by many as collaborationist). Persecution and discrimination have, Madsen suggests, only increased such tendencies, and an opportunist atheist regime apparently does what it can to make them worse.

Add to this the fact that the teachings of Vatican II, with their long overdue views of the church's openness to the world, have only recently begun to make their way into China. Add also the disquieting evidence that the weakening of Catholicism that Maoism could not bring about is being accomplished by the new economic openness. Many would agree with Madsen that the dog-eat-dog, acquisitive society of what Beijing likes to call "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is untempered by either the old Confucian morality (which the Communists destroyed), or a newer socialist morality (which they also managed to destroy, particularly during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76). The moral and spiritual vacuum thus created is exacerbated by an unjust state which is also thoroughly corrupt.

Are there any grounds for optimism, then? Madsen admits the shortcomings of his research, since he was not allowed really free access to his sources. He has primarily studied the North; in the South, he says, his findings might have been somewhat different (nearly everything, he suggests, looks better in the South than in the North). And he has found, in the cities like Shanghai and Tianjin, some slight evidence of the coming of a Catholic outlook more willing to engage a modernity that, like it or not, is here to stay, and the harsh edges of which Catholicism has the resources to temper for the better, if it will only use them.

If it will only use them. For, though Madsen does not explicitly make the argument, the reader here may find in the church's situation in China an analogue for the larger conundrum of the church's role in the world at large. Questions of parochialism, after all, or an unwillingness to cooperate with others, and a fear of change, are by no means restricted to the Middle Kingdom. Anyone following the doings of China's ruling party is struck by the ways in which a small group of aging powerholders try to control the terms of public discussion and to forbid the raising of contentious questions. "Bourgeois liberalism" and "spiritual pollution" are condemned, and just last year Xinhua, the government news agency, called for the nation's cultural sector to be "put under the guidance of the party leadership in the next century" so that a "powerful management and operations mechanism" can maintain for it an "explicitly socialist focus," and ensure adherence to the party orthodoxy.

As Western Catholics know, however, such signs of fear are not Beijing's alone, and the silencing of "dissidents" and condemnation of writings have taken place closer to home, even though the Vatican puts no one under arrest nor sends tanks into the streets against the unruly. Still, Madsen shows that we have much to learn from China, for the world at large needs a church not just revivified but resurrected, giving sinful and estranged and fearful people everywhere a hope. "Watching the signs of the times, a church that dares to continually reform itself may make that hope present not just in China but in the United States and in modern worlds everywhere groaning for reform." □

Nicholas R. Clifford *is the author of* The House of Memory *(1994), among other books.*

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(Continued from page 4)

meant to be a priest. It took me by surprise. But there it was.

I rarely speak about this experience, but it always comes back to me when someone asks, after knowing about my background, if I ever thought of or wanted to be a priest. The truth is, it's something I am called to. It is a response to God I would make if it were within the realm of possibility.

And here's the rub. I am called to something that I can do only if I betray myself; if I leave my church. This church, warts and all, is my church, and to leave it in order to be ordained would betray something deep inside me. Then ordination would become a grasping at, a need for me, and that's not what it is.

I wish to argue for the ordination of particular women, not "the ordination of women." None of us has a "right" to ordination. Nor do I wish to argue that ordaining women will transform the priesthood. The ministry of Jesus will remain lopsided (as it must!), full of wounded ones ministering to the wounded. It is not fairness or justice that moves me to write this letter. No, I argue on behalf of Mary, Jane, or Ginny who are called by God to the priesthood. Isn't it possible that the "Tradition" is continuing its movement and growth with the calls of these particular women? And finally, couldn't the Spirit be doing something new?

VIRGINIA M. RYAN
Worcester, Mass.

Pondering priesthood

Your January 29 issue provoked these reflections on women and ordination:

Frans Jozef van Beeck's possibly endearing but assuredly confused piece suggests that a purpose of the priesthood is to make men a little more like women, to temper men into the "consensual or convivial" creatures that women are by birth ["The Women in My Life"]. As an insight, this is ponderable; to suggest that it might form even a sliver of basis for excluding women from the priesthood is ridiculous. As soon assign men, and forbid women, traditionally female roles in child raising.

Rose Hoover's piece addresses the confusion involved in speaking of males as "naturally resembling" Christ ["Consider Tradition"]. Suppose (in some improbable contest) you were to win a day's outing with the risen Christ. But it turns out that he can't make it because of some last-minute scheduling conflict. Would you rather he sent to represent him "naturally" Cardinal Spellman or Saint Thérèse? (No one is called to represent Christ naturally; the word wanted here is personally.)

In your excerpt titled "Yves Congar on Patience," Congar requires that the innovator first respect "the primacy of charity and pastoral care." In the matter of women's ordination to the priesthood there are two groups needing our charity: some traditionalists and some women. I do not know the relative sizes of these two groups; doubtless, they are changing (and moving, as we are told the tectonic plates of Earth are moving). If we be quantitative about the sizes of the groups and the demands of charity, then what? In the following exchange the matter of when the members of a dinner party should finally sit down to their dinner is in question:

Boswell: "Ought six people to be kept waiting for one?"

Dr. Johnson: "Why yes, if the one will suffer more by your sitting down than the six will do by waiting."

PETE GREEN
Yonkers, N. Y.

Soul power

Thomas A. Shannon argues that because blastomeres (very early-stage preimplantation embryos) are not persons, it is morally legitimate to use them in research that may eventually produce tissue for generating new organs for transplantation as well as cells to be used in gene therapy ["Remaking Ourselves," December 4, 1998].

He bases part of his argument against the personhood of these entiti-

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ties on Duns Scotus's idea of "common nature," that which is common to both the group (class) and the individual. The individual is differentiated from the group by *haecceitas*, "thisness," Scotus's principle of individuation. The individual is an entity that is not divisible into other individuals. By analogous reasoning, Shannon claims, the human preimplantation embryo which is further divisible into individuals represents our common human nature, and, therefore, can't be a human person.

Shannon's argument from Scotus, while interesting, does not seem persuasive. According to traditional scholastic philosophy, including Scotus, the essence of human nature is a universal concept that exists purely in the intellect and can't be predicated of any individual entity. In that sense, every individual human person "represents" our common human nature, not just preimplantation embryos. In his reply to Sidney Callahan's letter [January, 15, 1999], Shannon acknowledges this by pointing out that Scotus "is an epistemological realist, not a nominalist"; he would agree that no one has ever seen a "common nature," and that there is a real referent for the universal existing in the mind. To think otherwise, of course, might lead someone to the absurd conclusion that our common nature is numerically the same in every individual.

Shannon rightly asserts that preimplantation embryos are genetically distinct from their parents and genetically unique. This is the "scientific" basis for the claim that we are all persons from the moment of conception: we have all our genetic endowment at that moment. His point about individuation of the blastomere would be better served, if an appeal to scholastic tradition is relevant, by the scholastic teaching on matter and substantial form, specifically, that no material object can have more than one substantial form. In the case of human beings, the substantial form is the rational soul infused by God, and it is the union of body and rational soul that constitutes the human person so that if there is no rational

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soul in bodily matter, there is no human person. To pick up on Shannon's point, then, the fact that each cell in a preimplantation embryo can become a separate individual or that this blastomere can divide into twins means that there cannot be two rational souls present in it; it would, in scholastic terminology, have a vegetative soul, but its bodily matter would not be sufficiently formed to accept a rational soul and could not, therefore, be a person. This was likely the reasoning behind the Council of Vienne's dictum (c. 1312) which held that the soul can only exist in a real human body (I take that to mean "sufficiently formed") and could not be present at the moment of conception. These council fathers, of course, did not know what we know about genetics and embryonic development.

Both Shannon's and the Council of Vienne's thinking, of course, run counter to the current position of the church based at least in part on the fact that the genetic completeness of the preimplantation embryo is evidence of a rational soul present from the moment of conception. While there doesn't seem to be absolute metaphysical certitude in this matter, the ultimate ground for this position is that prudence dictates that any doubt in a matter as grave as that of human personhood and its attendant rights should be resolved in personhood's favor.

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Pain vs. suffering

I was pleased to see Dr. Kevin P. Glynn take a public stand in favor of the principle of double effect as it applies to end-of-life medical decisions ["Double Effect," January 29, 1999]. He is right in pointing out that many vocal proponents of physician-assisted suicide (PAS) tend to cloud important intellectual and moral distinctions in order to champion their cause. One that is often blurred by the PAS supporters is the one between pain and suffering.

Pain is the perception by a sentient being of a noxious stimulus. An all-too-common clinical example of a severely painful state is the cancer patient who has metastatic bone lesions. However, suffering is a much more complex and (as far as I know) uniquely human experience. Suffering can occur outside of disease. A political prisoner in solitary confinement or a child who suddenly loses his or her parents suffers even though they may not experience any physical pain at all.

The television audience recently watching "60 Minutes" was lead to believe that Jack Kevorkian (I refuse to call him a doctor, regardless of what his diploma from medical school may say) publicly executed a "patient" with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) because the patient was in unrelenting pain and there is no medication capable of treating that pain. Is it therefore not appropriate to eliminate the pain, even if it means eliminating the patient as well?

ALS is a motor neuron disease. The sensory system is untouched in ALS. Patients with ALS rarely experience severe pain when receiving proper care. As a neurologist, I have firsthand experience with the fact that ALS patients can experience great suffering as the disease inevitably progresses. While analgesic medications are the prescription for pain, the prescription for suffering is compassion. How compassionate is it to actively euthanize someone? It is relatively simple to demonstrate that every possible nonlethal means relieving a patient's pain has been taken. It is not so simple to demonstrate that every possible nonlethal means has been taken to relieve a patient's suffering. To euthanize a suffering patient is the ultimate form of patient abandonment.

JAMES F. MESCHIA, M.D.
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BETTER LATE THAN . . .

Anthony D. Andreassi

I taught religion in an all-male Catholic high school in New York City for several years. And I have the scars to prove it. My first few weeks were predictably difficult, and I soon realized why so many veteran teachers warned me not to smile until Christmas. But for the most part, I figured out how to run a classroom and how to deal with students. I also learned something else.

A short while into my first term I came upon a situation that I had never anticipated. "John" was a bright and hard-working student, and he often asked thoughtful questions in class. His essays were always well-written and skillfully argued. John was also quite effeminate and the object of much ridicule. Although most of his classmates simply ignored John, a few would taunt him in my presence. John rarely seemed to mix with the other students and had only a couple of friends. In the hall during the general chaos between classes, the comments directed at him could be quite vicious. Yet in the face of all this derision, John kept his composure and kept trudging along.

At first I sometimes reprimanded boys who made inappropriate remarks to John. However, I thought that this might serve only to draw more attention to his plight. I did not have the courage to speak to John directly and ask him how he wanted me to deal with the harassment. After speaking to other teachers, I learned that the dean of students would punish boys who harassed John if he turned them in. Obviously this put John in a difficult situation, and I wondered if he wanted help from me as another authority figure. But maybe he just wanted to be treated like any other kid? After much consideration, I decided to ignore the uncharitable remarks. Only if the harassment was particularly severe would I step in. Yet when this plan was put to the test, I failed miserably.

One cold November afternoon after school, I was standing outside talking to a few students. Nearby the swim team was filling up a school bus on their way to a meet. John and another boy (who often was ridiculed for the same reasons) walked by on their way to the subway. As they passed the bus, a group of swimmers began shouting vicious comments at them. The team's actions certainly met the criteria I had set for when I should step in. But there were probably twenty boys participating in the derision, while more laughed and urged them on. How could I reprimand thirty boys? If I came out strongly and publicly in defense of John and the other student, would the students then turn on me? Would they begin to question my sexuality? These swimmers were the popular jocks of the school. Was I ready to alienate myself from them? I was a new teacher who was trying to prove myself. I had my own situation to think about. So I did nothing.

I felt intensely guilty about my failure to act. This guilt stayed with me, and whenever possible, as if to make up for my inaction, I would be extra kind and friendly toward John. As the year progressed, I felt the taunting had subsided, but maybe I (like John) had just grown accustomed to it. Early in my second year, some faculty members volunteered to participate in a sensitivity awareness workshop. In our discussions, homophobia emerged as a prejudice that was clearly present in our school. During a coffee break I casually discussed John's situation with the principal and explained how poorly I had dealt with it during the previous year. He suggested that I speak to John privately about what had happened.

I met with John and apologized for not having dealt properly with the teasing he had received in my presence. John said that he did not feel slighted by me and matter-of-factly began to speak about the difficulty of coming out as gay in an all-boys school. I did not know that John was openly gay, but he seemed quite comfortable speaking about it. He told me how his father had promised to throw him out of the house as soon as he turned eighteen, and how severe the taunting had been since he had started high school. I asked John how he felt about the church's teaching on homosexuality. He responded that he considered himself a good Catholic, went to church, and yet still felt that he had a right to live an openly gay life.

After that meeting, John and I did not have occasion to speak much. But life seemed to improve for him. The other students seemed either to accept him or simply to have grown bored with teasing him.

I doubt John will remember our conversation years from now, and he may remember little of the religious education from my class. His courage and perseverance amazed me. My own problems paled in comparison to his struggles. In teaching religion I had often grappled with how to present the church's moral teachings. I found that if I presented the material in a doctrinaire and uncompromising style, the boys would ignore me as quickly as they tuned out most authoritarian pronouncements. John confirmed me in my conviction that compassion, the willingness to live with ambiguity, and the centrality of the needs of the individual person are the keys to the teaching of Christian ethics to teenagers—or to anyone, for that matter. I will remember the lessons John taught me. Sometimes the roles of student and teacher get reversed. □

Anthony D. Andreassi *lives in Washington, D.C.*

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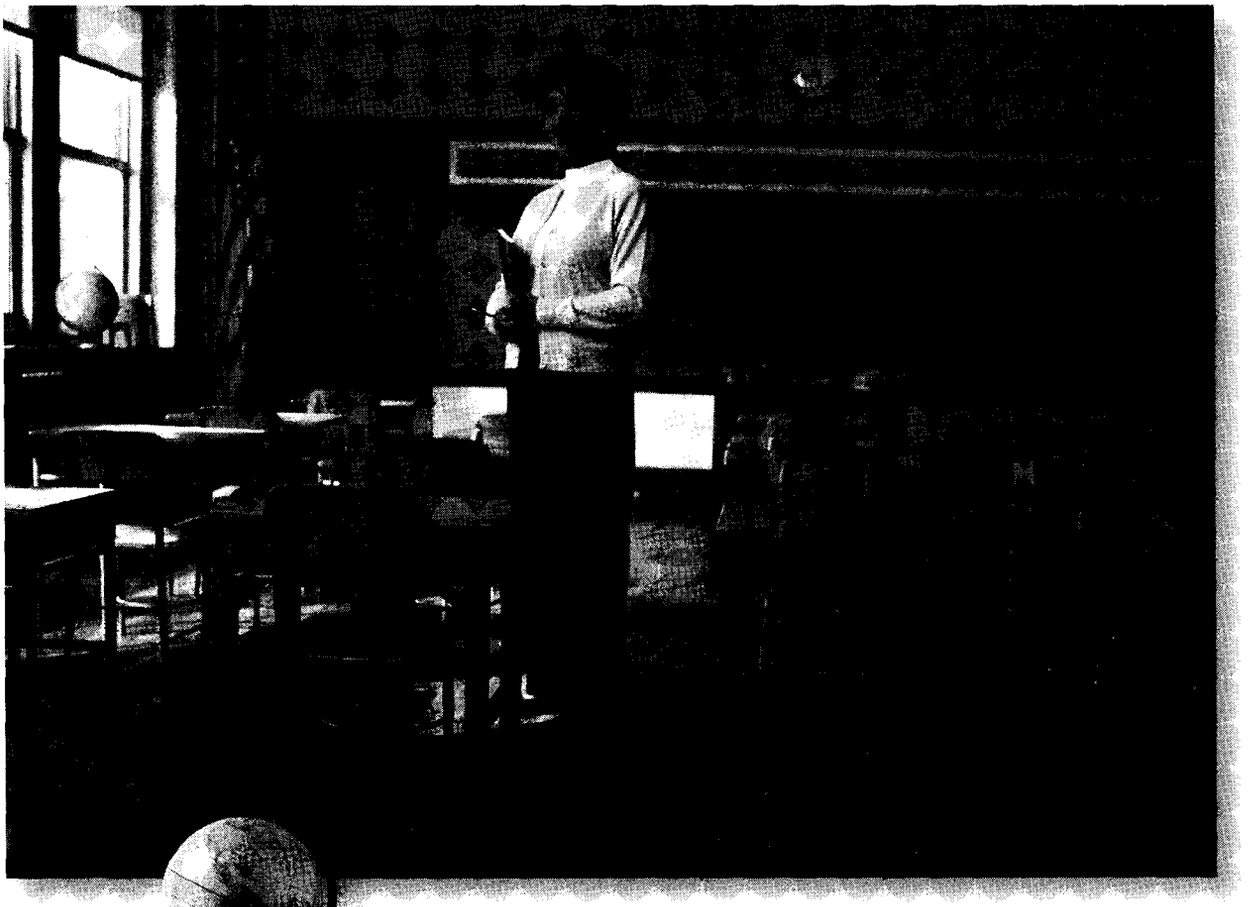

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